Weird Tales

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The Chosen of Vishnu
by
SEABURY QUINN

AUGUST, 1933

WEIRD TALES

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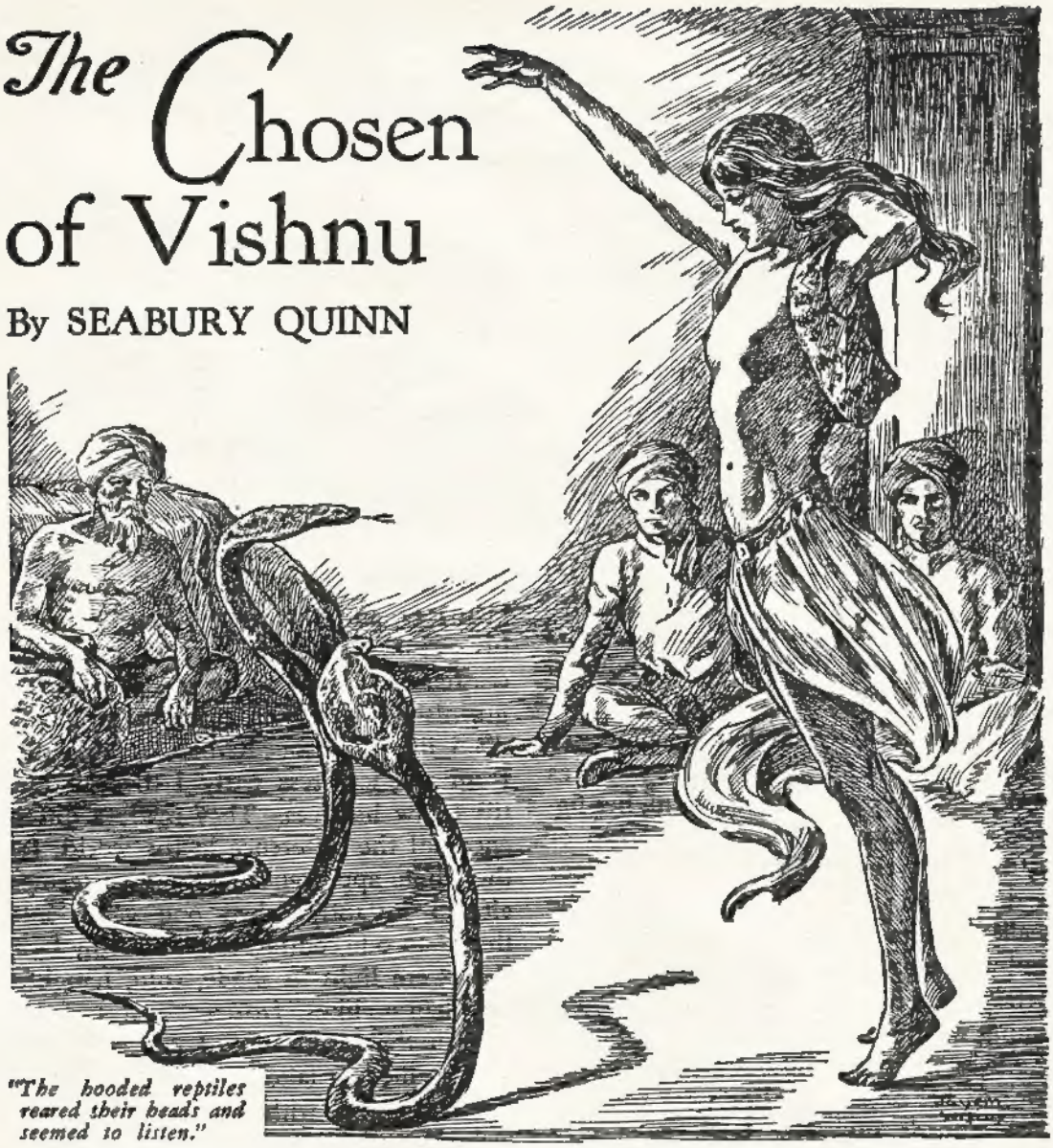
WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Chosen of Vishnu

By SEABURY QUINN



"The hooded reptiles reared their heads and seemed to listen."

A blood-freezing story of venomous cobras, Hindoo vengeance, and a beautiful dancing-girl—a brilliant exploit of Jules de Grandin

"GORDIEU, Friend Trowbridge, I am miserable as an eel with the stomach-ache; let us seek the air," pleaded Jules de Grandin. "One little minute more of this and my grandsire's only grandson will perish miserably by asphyxia."

I nodded sympathetically and began shouldering my way toward the conservatory. Once a year all Harrisonville which claimed the faintest right to see itself in the society columns of the local papers attended the Junior League's parade at the Bellevue-Standish, and this season's orgy had been even worse than usual. As special added attractions there had been several foreign consuls-general and an Indian princeling, round whom the women fluttered like flies around a freshly spilled sirup-pot, and the scent of flowers, of

conglomerate perfumes and faintly perspiring humanity was almost overpowering. I was heartily glad when we finally succeeded in forcing our way to the cool semi-darkness of the deserted conservatory, where we could find sufficient elbow room to light a cigarette, and take a dozen steps without imperilling our feet beneath a wild stampede of high-heeled slippers.

"Eh bien," de Grandin drew a gulp of smoke gratefully into his lungs, "me I think I shall remain here till the ceremonies are concluded; sooner would I spend the night right here than face that crowd to seek my hat and—ah, my friend, is she not the *chic, belle créature?"* He drove his elbow into my ribs and nodded toward the girlish form emerging from behind the great illuminated fishbowl at the entrance of the corridor.

He had not over-emphasized the facts. *"Belle"* she surely was, and *"chic"* as well. Not very tall, but very slim, her figure was accentuated by a black gown of transparent velvet which reached the floor and swirled about her insteps as she walked. Her eyes were large and wide and far apart, lustrous as purple pansy petals. Her hair, rich blue-black and glistening with brilliantine and careful brushing, was stretched without a ripple to the back of her neck. Her lips were full and darkly made up. Her teeth were very white and very even. Her skin, untouched by color, was faintly tan in shade, and shone as though it were a little moist. As she stepped we saw her heels were extremely high and her stockings sheer and dark. There was something sober, thoughtful, slightly frightened, I thought, in her expression as she faced the flower-and-fern lined corridor and paused a moment beside a lily-studded fountain, then half turned to retrace her steps.

Abruptly she halted, one slender, red-nailed hand half raised to her breast, as though to still the beating of a suddenly tumultuous heart, and stood at gaze, like a living creature frozen into marble at sight of Medusa's head.

Instinctively I followed the direction of her fascinated gaze and wondered at the terror which was limned upon her face. The man who had just stepped into the corridor was not particularly impressive. Undersized, extremely dark, slender, black hair, pomaded till it lay upon his scalp like a skullcap of black satin, he looked as though he would have been much more at home in Harlem than in our fashionable suburban hotel. Shirt studs and waistcoat buttons gleamed with brilliants, and against the lower edge of his evening coat was pinned a gem-encrusted decoration which glittered with a greenish glint in the conservatory's subdued illumination. Rather like a figure from a fancy-dress party I thought him till I saw his eyes. They made a difference; all the difference in the world, for the whole appearance of the man seemed altered instantly when one gazed into them. In odd contrast to his swarthy face, they were light in shade, cold, haughty, ophidian — like frozen agates — and though they were almost expressionless, they seemed to take in everything in the room—to see without beholding, and make a careful note of all they saw.

Apparently oblivious to the half-distracted girl, the man advanced, and, almost abreast of her, turned his freezing, haughty glance in her direction.

The result was devastating. Slowly, like something in a slow-motion picture, the girl bent forward, dropped gently to her knees, raised her arms above her head and bent her wrists till her right palm faced left, and the left palm right, then pressed her hands together and bowed her head demurely.

FOR a moment she knelt thus; then, still with that slow, deliberate, melting motion, she bent forward to the floor and touched her forehead to the tiles, stretched out her body slowly till she lay in utter prostration, feet straight out, ankles close together, hands extended to fullest reach before her, palms upward, as though inviting him to step upon them.

"Grand Dieu!" I heard de Grandin murmur, and caught my breath with a gasp of utter stupefaction as the dark-skinned man paused a moment in his step, glanced down upon the groveling girl with a look of loathing and disgust and *spat upon her.*

We saw her slender body quiver, as from a blow, as his spittle struck her on the neck, and:

"Monsieur, your face offends me and your manners are deplorable," said Jules de Grandin softly, emerging from behind the stand of potted palms where he had stood and driving a small, hard fist into the other's arrogant face.

The man staggered backward, for he was lightly made, and though de Grandin was of slender stature, his strength was out of all proportion to his size, and when cold fury lay behind his blows they were little less than deadly.

"Mais oui," the little Frenchman continued, advancing with a quick light spring, "your features are detestable, *Monsieur,* and spitting serpents are anathema to me. Thus I do to them, and thus—and thus——" With a speed and force and sureness which any bantam-weight fighter might well have envied, he drove successive vicious punches to the other's face, striking savagely till blood spurted from the beaten man's cut lips and battered nose, and the cold, insolent eyes grew puffy underneath his stabbing blows. At last:

"A bath may cool your ardor and teach you better manners, one may hope!" the Frenchman finished, driving a final swift uppercut to the other's chin and sending him toppling into the placid waters of the gold-fish pool.

"Wha—what's going on here?" a voice demanded and a tall young man rushed into the conservatory. "What——"

"Only a slight lesson in the niceties of etiquette, *Monsieur,"* de Grandin answered casually, but stepped quickly back to take advantage of the intervening space if the other should attack him.

"But——" the man began, then ceased abruptly as a sobbing, pleading cry came from the girl upon the floor:

"Edward—Karowli Singh!"

"Karowli Singh? *Here?* Why that's impossible! Where?"

"Here, in this hotel; this room——"

"Yes, by blue, in the fish-pond!" interjected Jules de Grandin, who had been turning his quick, quizzical glance from one of them to the other during their disjointed colloquy. "But do not be disturbed. He will remain in place until I give him leave to move, unless by any chance you would converse with him——"

"Oh, no, no; *no!"* the girl broke in. "Take me away, please."

"Perfectly," the Frenchman agreed with a quick, elfin smile. "Take her away, *Monsieur.* Me, I shall remain behind to see he raises no disturbance."

The man and girl turned to leave, but at the second step she faltered, leaned heavily against her escort, and would have fallen had he not caught her in his arms.

"She's fainted!" cried the young man. "Here, help me get her through the crowd. The house physician——"

"Ah bah!" de Grandin interrupted. "The house physician? *Pouf!* I am Doctor Jules de Grandin and this is my good friend and colleague, Doctor Sam-

uel Trowbridge, both at your instant service. If we can be of help——"

"Can you get us out of here?" the young man asked.

"But naturally, *Monsieur*. We have but to follow our noses. Our coats and hats may stay here for a time. Doctor Trowbridge's car waits without and we can drive all quickly to his office; then, when *Mademoiselle* is restored, I shall return and ransom them from the estimable young female bandit who presides at the check room. *Voilà tout.*"

THE girl was conscious, but strangely passive, lethargic as a fever convalescent, when we reached my house. She walked with trembling, halting steps, supported by her escort's arm, and more than once she stumbled and would have fallen had he not held her up.

"What this one needs is conversation," de Grandin whispered to me as we went down the hall. "Take them into the study, and I shall administer a stimulant, then encourage her to talk. She is beset by fear, and a discussion of her trouble will assist her to regain her mental poise. You agree?"

"I hardly know quite what to say," I returned. "It was the most outlandish thing——"

"Outlandish? You have right, my friend," he agreed with a smile. "It was —how do your so estimably patriotic Congressmen call it?—unAmerican, that reverence which she made that ape-faced one at the hotel. There is indubitably the funny business here, my old one. Oh, yes."

THE girl, the boy and I gazed at each other with mutual embarrassment. The incident I had witnessed at the hotel was so utterly bizarre, so degradingly humiliating to the woman, that instinctively I shrank from looking at her, as I might have done had I unwittingly surprized her in the act of bathing. The only one in full possession of his wits seemed Jules de Grandin, who was not only master of himself, but of the situation. Wholly at his ease, he administered a dose of Hoffman's anodyne to the girl, then gave her a cigarette, extending his silver pocket lighter to her with the same gay courtesy he would have shown to any usual visitor. At length, when she had set her cigarette alight and her escort's cigar was also properly ignited, he dropped into a chair, crossed his knees, and turned a frank, engaging smile upon the strangers.

"*Mademoiselle, Monsieur,*" he began in an easy conversational tone, "as I have told you, I am Doctor Jules de Grandin. But medicine is but an incident with me. In the course of my career it has fallen to my lot to serve my country with sword or wits in every quarter of the globe." He paused a moment, smiling lightly at the visitors, both of whom regarded him with somber, questioning glances. Plainly, they were in no mood for conversation, but more than unresponsiveness was needed to check the loquacious little Frenchman's flow of talk.

"During the great war, of which you have unquestionably heard, though you were only children when it happened, I had occasion to visit India," he pursued, and this time he drew fire, for the girl shuddered, as if with a chill, and the big young man set his lips with sudden grimness, yet neither of them spoke.

"But yes, of course," de Grandin rattled on, gazing with every sign of approval at the polished tip of his patent leather evening pump, "there was a time when our then allies, the British, had good reason to doubt the loyalty of one of their vassal native princes. He was more

than half suspected of carrying on an intrigue with the *boches;* certainly he was known to be employing German drillmasters for the tatterdemalion disorganization he liked to call his army, and at any moment he might have loosed his tribesmen on the Indian frontier, causing much annoyance to the British. Oh, yes.

"British spies could not get to him, but his activities must be known, and so, 'Jules de Grandin,' said the French Intelligence, 'you will please dye your hair and mustache and raise a beard, which you will also dye, then you will go to Dhittapur' " — consternation, blank surprize, showed on the faces of his hearers, but de Grandin kept on evenly, still admiring the toe of his pump—" 'you will go to Dhittapur, posing as a French renegade, and seek service in the army of his Highness, the Maharajah.'

"Tiens, when one is ordered, one obeys, my friends. I went to that benighted country, I served the squint-eyed son of Satan who ruled over it; more, I met and came to know his charming little son and heir—as diabolical a young imp as ever plucked the plumage from a screaming parrot or tortured a caged and helpless leopard with hot irons. His name, unless I am mistaken, was Karowli Singh."

"Karowli Singh!" echoed the girl in a thin, frightened whisper.

"Précisément, Mademoiselle, and the opportunity I had tonight to drive my fist into his most unpleasant face was grateful as a drink of water in the desert, I assure you." He paused a moment, then:

"Now that we have established rapport by identifying mutual friendships, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me how and when it was you first became acquainted with the so charming gentleman, *Mademoiselle?"*

There was a long moment's silence; then, in a voice so low that we could barely hear it: "I belonged to him," the girl replied.

"Ah?" de Grandin brushed the trimly waxed ends of his little blond mustache. "You were——"

"I was a *bayadère,* or woman of the inner temple," she broke in. "At the age of five I was affianced to Vishnu, Preserver of the Universe; at seven I was married to him. I was a 'chosen one of the Sacred Bulls of Yama.' I and six other little girls were stripped and tied between the horns of the temple's sacred bulls, and the animals were then goaded into fighting each other. When they drove their heads together, their sharp, brass-tipped horns cut through the bodies of the children tied to them as though they had been bayonets. Of the seven 'choices' I was the only one alive when the cattle had done fighting; so my candidacy for marriage to the god was divinely ordained.

"For another seven years, until I was a full-grown woman according to Hindoo reckoning, I was schooled in the learning of the temple women; for hours each day I practised the devotional dances, working till my muscles ached as though with rheumatism and the skin was braized from my soft, bare feet. Then I learned the gesture dance, which requires years of practise before the performer learns to assume the nine hundred and forty-three symbolic postures and hold them with the rigidity of a statue; last of all I learned the Dance of the Seven Enticements, which is a combination of the Arabian *danse du ventre* and contortionism, the dancer being required not only to swing shoulders, hips, breasts and abdomen in time to the rhythm of the music, but to bend her head backward or forward to the floor without lifting either heels or toes or assisting herself with her hands. I also learned to play upon the *sitar* and

tambourine and to sing the adorations, or love songs, which only women of the inner temple are taught, for they are experts in the arts of love and supply the most exclusive clientele in India.

"*Nautchis*—women of the outer temple—are merely *deva-dasis,* or slaves of the gods, and are plentiful in India, every tourist sees them; but *naikin bayadères* are never seen by the public. They keep strict *purdah,* for they are wives of the gods whose shrines they serve, and on the rare occasions when they appear outside the temple are as closely veiled and carefully watched as *ranis* of the mightiest maharajahs. For a low-caste man to touch one of them, or even to look upon her unveiled face, is a capital offense. Not even every Brahmin may approach them; only the higher orders of the priesthood and those of royal blood may speak to them without being first spoken to."

Her full, sad mouth curved in a sarcastic smile as she continued: "But the priests do not spend years in educating these women merely for the glory of the gods—*bayadères* are not like Christian nuns; far from it. When the *naikin* has served her long novitiate and been examined for proficiency in every branch of her learning, she is ready for service. For a stipulated fee she may be hired to dance and sing at the sumptuous entertainments of the rajahs; for a greater sum she may be sent to the zenana of some prince to remain there as long as he pays the yearly rental agreed upon with the priests. But never can she be married, for she is already a wife, wedded to the god whose temple she serves.

"I always hated the temple and the temple life. The priests were foul beasts; lazy, drunken, addicted to drugs and every imaginable form of vice; there was an undercurrent of nastiness running through every word and act and thought inside the temple, and against this I rebelled, but only instinctively, for my background was purely Hindoo, and all my experience since babyhood had been in the poisonous atmosphere of the inner temple.

"Then, one day when I was still a little girl, according to Western ideas, I was taken with some older temple women to assist at a *nautch* given by a great noble, for already my voice had developed and I was clever at playing on the *sitar* and singing the simpler *ghazals,* or love songs. Traffic was impeded by a herd of sacred cows moving through the street, and our camel-carriage stopped by a corner where a missionary *sahib* was preaching. He talked in the vernacular, and my childish ears drank up his words as sunburned sand absorbs the grateful rain-drops. Never before had I dreamed there could be such a god as that he spoke of. The gods I knew were cruel, lecherous and vengeful; this god the *Englay sahib* told of was gracious, kind and merciful, 'desiring not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should leave his wickedness and lead a new life,' he said—and every god I knew wreaked punishment on his followers through countless incarnations. At last the missionary finished and pronounced his benediction in a foreign tongue. The words were strange to me, but the syllables clung indelibly in my childish memory: '. . . by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.'

"Then the traffic was resumed and our cart moved on, but the seed of rebellion had been sown in my heart.

"WHEN I was fourteen it was arranged that I should go to the zenana of Karowli Singh, the new Maharajah of Dhittapur, for he had seen me

dancing in the temple and desired me; desired me so much that he paid the priests an annual rental of 30,000 rupees —nearly $10,000—for me in advance.

"The temple slaves dressed me in my finest clothes, put emerald ear-rings in my ears and a golden flower in my nose, loaded my arms and wrists and ankles with bangles and put a ring on every toe and finger. Then I was ready for my royal master—I a child of fourteen who for seven years had been a wife, yet never felt a man's caress. I was supposed to be elated at my fortune, and they had no thought that I would try to run away. The fact that I was destined for the harem of a rajah was considered sufficient protection; so only one old woman, too old for other service, was sent with me as *ayah*.

"We had almost reached the limits of the city, and my *ayah* had put back the curtains of our bullock cart for air, when I chanced to see a tall, broad-shouldered *sahib* walking by the road. I had not seen many *sahibs* in my life, but this one seemed strangely familiar to me, for while he wore the white-drill clothes and pith sun-helmet common to every *feringhi*, his collar was different, and instead of a cravat he wore a little patch of black cloth on his chest. I recognized him; he was a missionary *sahib* like the one whose sermon had so thrilled me years before.

"Before the old woman or the *gharry-wallah* could restrain me I had leaped from the bullock cart and rushed up to the missionary *sahib*. I knew just what to say, for years I had repeated those unknown but thrilling foreign words in my temple cell. I flung myself down before him, taking the dust from his feet and crying:

"'*. . . defend us from all perils and dangers, through Jesus our Lord. Amen!*'

"The old *ayah* ran screaming in protest, and the *gharry-wallah* joined her and would have dragged me back, but the *Englay sahib* carried a blackthorn stick and beat them off with it. Even when the *gharry-wallah* drew a knife the *sahib* did not let me go, but struck the knife out of his hand and beat him till he squealed for mercy.

"Then he took me to a mission school and I was baptized as Madeline Kamla, and was no longer Kamla Devi, the temple woman.

"Karowli Singh was furious. He demanded return of the rental he had paid for me, but the priests refused to refund it unless he delivered me to them, and so a feud was started.

"But now I was in double peril, for both the maharajah and the priests desired me. The prince's dignity had been affronted by my flight, and he could not regain the 30,000 rupees rental he had paid till he delivered me at the temple. The priests demanded my return that they might torture me to death as a warning to other *bayadères*, for if other temple women followed my example and escaped, they would lose much money.

"But since I had been married to the great god Vishnu and made a *naikin bayadère* they could not put me to death ceremoniously unless I voluntarily relinquished my rank and titles. They might poison or stab me, or hide a scorpion in my bed, or the maharajah's servants might kidnap or murder me, but only my voluntary relinquishment of my status as a wife of Vishnu could give the priests the right to torture me to death. Still, if they could once get hold of me I knew that some way would be found to make me say the ancient formula of renunciation: 'Do with me as thou wilt.' For a temple woman to forsake her divine husband and her marriage vows and run away, espe-

cially to become a Christian, is an unforgivable sin, you know, and merits death by torture here and unending torment throughout the Seven Eternities hereafter.

"They tried to capture me by every means they knew. Twice emissaries from the maharajah attempted to abduct me from the mission, temple girls were sent as pretended converts to the school with poisoned sweetmeats, and even with deadly little karaits, or dust-snakes, concealed in leather bags to be put into my bed; once the mission was set afire. Finally the priests brought pressure on the British *raj*, and threatened an uprising if I were not returned.

"The British did not want to give me up, but it is their policy never to interfere with the religion of the country, and my shelter by the mission was making it very difficult for the government. Finally it was decided that I would be safer in America, where chance of pursuit by the priests or maharajah seemed impossible, so it was decided to send me here; but the question of my entry offered fresh difficulties. Hindoos are not eligible for naturalization, though ethnically we are as much members of the white race as the English and Germans, and the quota barriers prevented my entry otherwise. I could come as a student, but when my studies were completed I should have to return, and that would mean my certain death. Finally"—a flush mantled her olive cheeks—"finally it was decided I might enter as a non-quota immigrant, if I came as——"

She paused, and for the first time her escort spoke:

"If she came in as my wife. It was my father, the Rev. Edward Anspacher, to whom she first appealed, and I met her at the mission three years later when I went out to visit Dad after my graduation from Rutgers. I don't know how it was with Madeline—yes, I do, too, she's told me!—it was love at first sight between us, and I'd have married her and brought her home with me even if that pack of hell-hounds hadn't been yapping at her heels. What I can't understand, though, is whether it's just an evil chance that brings Karowli Singh here, or whether he found out where we lived and came here on purpose to get Madeline. It doesn't matter much now, though; he's seen her."

"But why did you—er—bow to him when you saw him tonight?" I asked the girl. "Surely, you're so changed, with your Western clothes and the passage of time, that you might have ignored his presence, and the chances are he'd never have recognized you."

She gave me a quick, sad smile. "Doctor Trowbridge," she replied, "during the most impressionable period of my life I was under the utter domination of the priests, having no thought or word or act save such as they dictated. I believed implicitly in their power and in the power of the gods of India. Five years among Americans is not enough to overcome the training of a lifetime, and when a person has been reared in the knowledge that a certain class of others hold her life at the dictate of their slightest whim, and when she has been compelled to prostrate herself and kiss the earth before those others—why, when I came suddenly face to face with Karowli Singh tonight, my early training came over me with a sudden rush, and automatically I made him the 'sublime obeisance' with which I had been taught to greet priests and rajahs in my childhood."

IT WAS very quiet in the study as the girl ceased speaking. To me there was something horrible in the matter-of-fact

way in which she had related her bizarre story. She was little more than a child, and all the dreadful things of which she told had occurred since the Armistice, yet——

"Eh bien, Monsieur," de Grandin's practical comment broke through my thought, "it seems they have long memories—and arms—these genial gentlemen of Dhittapur. I gave you better advice than I realized when I suggested that you leave your wraps and come with us. If you will excuse me I shall go now and retrieve them. You will await my return?" He rose with a bow, ascended the stairs to his room and employed himself with some mysterious business for a few moments.

"I shall return anon," he announced from the front hall. "Do you entertain *Madame* and *Monsieur,* Friend Trowbridge, and on no account permit yourselves to be enticed from the house till I come back."

"Not much fear of that," I assured the visitors as the door banged to behind my little friend. "It's nearly morning, and my practise is scarcely the kind which brings casual patients to——"

A sudden battering-ram knocking at the front door interrupted, and, though my declaration of intention was still uncompleted, I rose with the medical man's ingrained habit to answer the summons.

"Be careful!" warned the girl as I went down the hall. "Do not open the door, Doctor; look through the window, first, for——"

Some secret warning in my inner consciousness bade me follow her advice and I put back the curtain of the door's sidelight and peered out on the darkened porch.

Tight fingers seemed to close about my throat as I looked, and involuntarily I shook my head to clear my vision. There, crouched upon the door-mat, green eyes shining with malevolent anticipation, was a great, striped tiger, and even as I looked, I saw the beast put forth a pink tongue and lick its chaps. "Good heavens——" I began, but:

"Kai hai!" the girl called shrilly as she peered across my shoulder at the crouching beast. Followed a flood of high-pitched, singsong phrases, screamed rather than spoken, and, accompanying them, the girl's slim hands seemed to trace invisible figures in the air.

Amazement gave way to something like superstitious awe in my heart as I saw the gigantic beast slowly become wraith-like, transparent, finally vanish completely, like a slow fade-out in a motion picture.

"Wha—what was it?" I queried. "Was there really something there, or——"

Madeline Anspacher was trembling violently, and her pale-olive face seemed to have gone paler, making her large, purple eyes seem bigger by comparison, but she took control of herself with an effort as she answered: "Yes, it was there, ready to spring on you if you unbarred the door; yet——"

"But I saw it fade away," I cut in. "Was it really a tiger or was it just——"

"I can not explain," she answered quickly. "You have seen yogis do their magic; seen them make a whole tree grow from a planted seed in a minute or so, perhaps? How they do it no one knows, but I have seen it done many times and I have heard some of their charms. The chant I recited was the one they use to make a vision vanish. I do not know the words they use to conjure up a spell, nor do I think that what I said to make it go away would have been effective if the *guru* had been near by; so he must be

working his magic from a distance, perhaps as far away as——"

"Ron, ron, ron,
Le bleu dragon . . ."

Singing blithely, though a trifle bawdily, Jules de Grandin came up the path, his arms laden with our visitors' outdoor wraps.

"Sacré de nom,
Ron, ron, ron . . ."

"De Grandin!" I cried, caution thrown away as I unlatched the door and leaped out on the porch. "Look out, de Grandin, the tiger's there, and——"

Something tawny-black and horribly agile, a great cat-thing, seemed suddenly to materialize out of the cold morning air and launch itself like a bolt of living fire at my small friend, and my warning changed to a shout of inarticulate terror as I looked.

But, astonishingly, the pouncing beast seemed stopped in mid-spring, as though it came in contact with a barricade of invisible steel bars, and the little Frenchman proceeded on his way as imperturbably as though out for an early-morning stroll. "Do not disturb yourself, *mon vieux,*" he bade me almost casually, "it is a harmless pussy-cat they send—harmless as long as I am possessed of this!" he added, unclasping his right hand to display a crumpled marigold blossom in his palm. "For every poison there is an antidote, and this is that which makes them powerless, *n'est-ce-pas, petite?*" he smiled engagingly at Mrs. Anspacher.

The girl nodded. "It is a very holy flower in India," she admitted. "We—the temple women—used to wear wreaths of it on our heads, and garlands of it are draped on Vishnu's idols; but I never understood its real significance or——"

"*Tiens,* how many Christians know the meanings of the prayers they say?" he interrupted with an elfin grin. It is enough that the flower possesses virtue to protect its bearer against such empty magic as these old ones make. However"—he stepped inside the house, deposited his burden on the hall table and invited our attention to an inch-long tear in his overcoat—"this was no empty gesture, *mes amis.*"

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed. "What did it?"

"A knife," he answered easily. "This, to be specific." From his pocket he produced a double-edged dagger, a frightful-looking thing with heavy blade six inches long, wider at tip than base, its shaft set in a hilt of hammered brass.

"A Pathan throwing-knife!" exclaimed the girl.

"Perfectly, *Madame,* a very useful tool for liberating the soul of one whose existence annoys you," he agreed. "I was leaving the hotel, having no more thought of assault than the simple, innocent lamb has of mistreatment from the butcher, when *whish!* I feel the kick of this thing in my back, and the breath is all but knocked from out my lungs. Also, at the same time I hear the beat of running feet. They are not brave, those ones. No, they feared to stand and try conclusions with Jules de Grandin, even though they thought he had been killed to death by their so treacherous knife-in-the-back. Yes."

"But, great heavens, man!" I expostulated. "That hole in your coat is three inches below and three inches to the right of your left scapular. However did it miss your heart?"

"By not reaching it — or my hide, either," he answered with a chuckle. Divesting himself of overcoat and jacket, he displayed a close-fitting, sweater-like garment of finely woven steel chains above his waistcoat. "Jules de Grandin is the

simpleton of no one," he informed us gravely. "When I set forth tonight I said to me, 'Jules de Grandin, only an exceedingly brave man or an exceedingly chuckle-headed fool goes into danger unprepared, and the chances of his being a fool are far greater than of his being merely brave. Jules de Grandin, is it that you are an imbecile?'

" 'Oh, no; by no means,' I assure me. 'It are far otherwise.'

" 'Very well, then, Jules de Grandin,' I inform me, 'you would do well to take precautions.'

" 'And by the whiskers of a pink-faced fish, I shall take them, Jules de Grandin,' I replied to me.

"Therefore I went up to my room and took out from my bureau drawer this shirt of chain-mail which I used to wear in Paris when the exigencies of my work took me among the so amiable *apaches*. They are ready workers with their knives, those ones, and more than once I have owed the preservation of my health to this little vest of steel.

"Those ones whom I might meet tonight, I knew, could use a knife for other purposes than to cut their food, and so I did not greatly trust them. Also, lest they add magic to attempted murder, I stopped at the hotel florist's and bought a bunch of marigolds. So I was doubly armed. *Eh bien,* it was as well. Their knife glanced harmlessly away when it should have pierced my gizzard; their magic-summoned tiger was foiled by my flower. It has been a wholly satisfactory night thus far, my friends. Let us take a drink and go to bed while we still have our luck."

How long I had been sleeping I do not know, but it must have been some time, for the rectangle of moonlight from the window had moved perceptibly since I went to bed, and the eastern sky was showing vague streaks of slate-gray when I sat up, stark awake as though some one had slapped me while I slept. "What was it?" I asked myself, looking round the room in which I seemed to sense the presence of something alien, something which had no right to be there. Had I felt something, or dreamed it, or heard——

Instinctively I held my breath, seeking to pierce the smothering half-light with straining ears. I *had* heard something, but what? A cry, a voice, or——

Thin, muffled, like music issuing from a radio when the station is not accurately tuned in, I descried a queer, ululating whine, a rising, a falling, faintly surging and receding monotonous singsong; flat, raucous, metallic, like—what *was* it like, I asked myself, then, for some cause which had nothing to do with conscious reasoning, shuddered as recognition came to me. It was like the dismal, dolorous caterwauling of a juggler's reed pipe when the snake-charmer lifts the basket-lid and the scaly serpents slither out to "dance" upon their tails! "What in heaven's name——" I stammered wonderingly; but:

"Trowbridge, *mon vieux,*" de Grandin's soft, insistent whisper sounded from the door, "are you awake?"

"Yes," instinctively I lowered my voice in answer. "What is that——"

"S-s-st," he warned. "No noise, if you please; for the dear God's sake bump into nothing when you rise. Come at once, and walk softly, if you please."

Wondering, I obeyed, and we hastened down the hall to the chamber we had assigned to Mr. and Mrs. Anspacher.

Again I shuddered, for no known reason, as we stopped silently before the door. Unmistakably the whining, droning hum proceeded from the guest room,

and the sharp vibrance of it grated on my ears like the cacophony of a buzzing July locust.

De Grandin's lifted finger enjoined silence as he laid one hand on the knob and slowly, deliberately as the minute hand travels round the clock dial, began to twist the handle. The keeper slipped back with the faintest of faint clicks, and with the same slow care he pushed the white door open.

Despite his plea for silence, I could not forbear a gasp of horror and astonishment at the scene revealed. In bed lay Edward and Madeline Anspacher, not sleeping, but very still. Twin bodies in the slumber room of a funeral home could not have lain more quietly upon their biers than these two underneath the silken coverlet; yet their eyes were open wide and both were waking—waking to a horror which was like the unsupportable suspense of the poor wretch on the gallows while he waits the springing of the drop. For upon the bed's foot, its dreadful, flattened head backed by a bloated, outspread hood, coiled a great cobra, three feet or so of scale-shod body looped upon the comforter, and three feet more upreared in the air, its forked tongue darting lambently between its thin, cruel lips, its narrow, death-charged head swinging to and fro as it bobbed and swayed and undulated to the measure of the wavering, whining, almost tuneless chant which Madeline Anspacher repeated endlessly, forcing the four quavering notes between stiffened, fear-grayed lips.

Nearly inaudible as our advent was, the sensitive ears of the serpent warned it we had come, and for an instant it turned questioning, threatening eyes in our direction; then, as though it knew that we were there to rob it of its prey, a sort of ripple ran down its body as it flexed itself for a stroke, and we saw the wicked head draw back an inch or so, heard Madeline's despairing scream as her chant broke off, and——

Bang! So swiftly Jules de Grandin fired that though the first shot struck the striking cobra's head even as it darted forward, the second bullet hit the scaly neck less than a half-inch from the wound made by the first; but the taut-drawn body of the reptile did not topple over. Instead it bent deliberately, slowly, toward the far side of the room, as though it had been pushed by an invisible prod, and the Frenchman had time to leap across the floor, draw his heavy hunting-knife and slash the gleaming body clear in two before the supple, coiling thing had fallen to the floor.

"*Parbleu,* I was not sure that I had hit him for a moment," he explained. "These small-bore steel-tipped bullets, they have not the striking power of the leaden ones."

I nodded absently, for my full attention was directed toward the pair upon the bed. Madeline had fainted, and her husband lay half conscious by her side, his lips agape, his tongue against his lower teeth, a smile of semi-idiocy on his face.

"*Mon Dieu,*" de Grandin cried, "quick, my friend! Stimulants—ether, brandy, strychnin. They are in a pitiable state!"

They were, indeed. Hot applications and normal stimulants failing, we were forced to resort to intravenous saline infusions before our efforts were successful, and even then our patients' state was not entirely satisfactory.

"Good thing neither of 'em had a weak heart," I muttered grimly as we worked. "We'd surely have had a coroner's case on our hands if they weren't both so young and strong."

"Um," de Grandin answered as he mixed the saline solution, "there will be

a case for the coroner when I lay hands upon the miscreant who inserted that *sacré* snake into this house, you may bet yourself anything you please."

"I DON'T know how it happened," Madeline told us later in the day when, somewhat recovered from their profound shock, she and her husband were able to drink some broth and sit up in bed. "We didn't go to sleep at once, for both of us were badly frightened. Karowli Singh meant mischief, we were sure. We'd seen the tiger phantom which his *guru* sent against us, and Doctor de Grandin had told us of the attempt on his life. He'd been checked in every move so far, but a man with his capacity for hate and his determination to get revenge wouldn't be stopped so easily, we were certain.

"Finally, we managed to drop off, for it seemed impossible he could harm us so long as we were here; then——" She paused a moment, and de Grandin helped her to a sip of sherry. "I woke up feeling something on my feet. At first I thought it might be the bed clothes tucked in too tightly, and I was about to sit up and loosen them when I felt the weight move. It wasn't quite dawn, but it was light enough for me to make out the shape of the cobra coiling for a stroke.

"For an instant I thought I should die with fright, but one born and reared in India knows snakes, and one reared in a temple as I was knows something of snake-charming, too. I'd seen the fakirs with their dancing snakes a thousand times, and knew the tune they played to lull the venomous things into temporary harmlessness. If I could imitate a fakir's pipe I might be able to keep it from striking long enough for help to come, I thought, and so I began singing. It really wasn't very much of a trick, for I knew the pipe-music as American children know popular jazz songs, and I'd imitated the jugglers' pipes for my own amusement a hundred times.

"I don't know how long I sang. Edward woke at the first note and I was terrified for fear he'd move and break the spell, but fortunately he understood I meant him to lie quiet when I squeezed his hand; so we lay there for what seemed years while I held the snake's attention with my singing. Then when you finally came to help us, the sound of your entrance seemed to break the spell, and the cobra was about to strike when Doctor de Grandin shot it. Oh"—she covered her face with trembling hands—"I can still feel those dreadful coils harden on my feet as it contracted its muscles and braced its tail to strike!"

"Perfectly, *Madame,*" de Grandin nodded. "It was a terrible experience you had. One understands."

"WELL, whatever the tiger was, that snake was certainly no imaginary thing conjured up by a magician," I remarked as we left the patients and went to seek a bite of luncheon.

"Tu parles, petit," he agreed with a grin. "I cremated him in the furnace this morning, and he burned as beautifully as who sent him will eventually roast in hell, I assure you."

"Karowli Singh?" I asked.

"Who else, *pardieu?* Who else would have snakes ready to his hand, and introduce them through your second-story windows, my friend? Me, I think I shall enjoy tweaking that one's nose most heartily. But yes."

A DAY in bed worked wonders for our patients and by evening they were ready to go home, though de Grandin urged them to remain with us a little longer so that he might be prepared to

ward off any fresh attempt upon their lives. "He is a clever fellow, that one," he declared, "but Jules de Grandin is cleverer. Consider: I have made a monkey out of him at every turn, and I can continue so to do. Will you not stay with us?"

"Much obliged, sir," young Anspacher answered, "but I think Madeline and I will go home and pack. There's a steamer leaving for Bermuda tomorrow night, and we can make it if we hurry. I'll feel a lot more normal when we've put several thousand miles of ocean between us and Karowli Singh. We may not be as lucky next time as we were last night."

"*Tiens*, if you go away from me you may have no luck at all," the little Frenchman answered with a smile. "You can not have de Grandin at your elbow in Bermuda."

"Guess we'll have to take a chance on that," the young man replied, and so it was arranged.

Shortly after dinner I drove them to their apartment in the Durham Court, and we left them with their doors fast locked and windows tightly bolted. "We shall hope to see you at the ship," de Grandin said at parting. "In any event, call us on the telephone tomorrow morning, and tell us how it is with you."

He was silent through the evening, smoking cigarette after cigarette, staring abstractedly before him into the fire, muttering vague incoherencies to himself from time to time. Once or twice I sought to draw him into conversation, but met with only monosyllabic answers. At ten o'clock I rose and went to bed, for the night before had been a hard one and I felt the need of sleep acutely.

Sometime after midnight the irritable stutter of my bedside 'phone wrenched me from the embrace of a dreamless sleep, and:

"Doctor Trowbridge, can you come right over? This is Mrs. Frierson speaking," an agitated voice announced.

"Mrs. Frierson of the Durham Court Apartments?" I asked, feeling mechanically for the clothes which lay ready folded on the bedside chair.

"Yes—it's Eleanor. Something dreadful's happened."

"Eh? What?" I answered professionally. "Something dreadful," I well knew from past experience with half-hysterical mothers, might mean anything from a wrenched ankle to a case of acute appendicitis, and it was well to have the proper kit assembled ere I set out.

"Yes, yes; she's—they tried to kidnap her, and she's in a dreadful state!"

"All right, keep her in bed with hot water bottles or an electric pad, and give her twenty drops of aromatic ammonia in a wine-glass of chilled water," I prescribed, and I hung up the 'phone and finished dressing.

"Is it Madame Anspacher perhaps?" de Grandin asked, appearing abruptly at the bedroom door. "I heard the night 'phone ringing, and——"

"No, but it's a girl living in the same apartment," I answered wearily. "Somebody tried to kidnap her, and she's in 'a state,' her mother tells me. Want to come along?"

"Assuredly," he agreed. "These midnight calls are often of much greater interest than at first seems likely. Await me downstairs. I shall join you immediately."

"Queer how cases seem to run in series," I commented as we drove toward Durham Court. "We've just finished treating the Anspachers for shock; now here's another girl, living in the same house with them, needing treatment for the same condition. They usually run in

groups of three; wonder who the next one will be?"

"*Parbleu,* if what I damn suspect is true, perhaps it *is* I who shall need your kindly services," he responded with a smile.

MISS FRIERSON'S condition was not serious, and I found that simple treatment would suffice. Plainly, she had been badly frightened, and just as plainly she desired an appreciative audience to admire her filmy crêpe nightclothes, and listen to her story.

"I went out to Idlewild with Jack Sperry, Mabel Trumbull and Fred Spicer," she told us, "but the place was lousy; nothing doing there and nothing fit to drink, so we decided to cut it and come in town to Joe's place. They always have good liquor there. Know the dump? Hot-cha, it's a regular joint!

"Well, I'd noticed another car trailing us all the way from Idlewild, keeping about the same distance from us whether we went fast or slow, and it got my Billy. Too much of this holdup stuff on the country roads these nights, and though I didn't have anything 'specially valuable in the way of jewelry, I didn't hanker to be mauled around by a gang o' bandits. It's bad enough to have to stand that sort o' thing from your boy friend.

"Everything was jake till we got almost to town; then our left front tire went haywire, and Jack and Fred got out to change it. Mabel and I climbed down to stretch our legs and give the boys moral support, and while we stood there the other car came roaring up like an engine going to a three-alarm fire. They stopped so short the gravel shot in all directions from their wheels, and some of it hit me in the face. Next thing I knew they'd grabbed me and dragged me into their car and were off again, starting in high and running like a streak of greased lightning.

"One of 'em threw a bag or something over my head, so I couldn't see who had me or which way we were going, but I managed to struggle till I could look down under the folds of cloth around my head and catch a glimpse of the hands that held me. It was a colored man."

"*Mordieu,* a colored man, you say, *Mademoiselle?*" de Grandin asked softly.

"Yes," she replied, "and all the rest of 'em were colored, too."

"The rest?"

"Yes. They drove like Lord-knows-what for half an hour or so—we must have covered twenty miles at least—and finally brought up at an old and apparently deserted house. I was peeping between the folds of the cloth over my head as much as I could, and my brain was fairly active, noting all the landmarks, for I was bound I'd make my getaway at the first opportunity, and I wanted to know which way to run.

"They hustled me down a dark hall and flung me into a little room not much bigger than a closet. I felt around the walls and made sure there was no window in the place, then sat down on the floor to think things over. Almost before I realized it they were back—three of 'em—and I saw I'd been mistaken in my first guess. They weren't Negroes, but some sort of dark-skinned foreigners—Turks or something."

"*Eh,* Turks, you say, Mademoiselle?" de Grandin interjected. "How is it that you——"

"Well, maybe they weren't Turks, they might have been Arabs or something like that. All I know is that they were almost as dark as colored men, except that they were more coffee-colored than chocolate-tinted, and they all wore

turbans, and when they talked to each other it sounded like smashing china.

"Two of 'em grabbed me and the other one put his nose almost against mine and said something that sounded like 'carbarn,' or——"

"Dieu de Dieu!" de Grandin ejaculated. *"Kurban!"*

"Maybe that was it," the girl conceded. "I wasn't paying much attention to exact pronunciation right then; I had other things to think of.

" 'Look here, you,' I told the man who spoke to me, 'if you think you can get away with this you're mighty much mistaken. My uncle's an alderman, and you'll have the whole Harrisonville police force on your necks before morning if you don't turn me loose at once!'

"That seemed to sober him, all right, for he looked surprized and said something to the fellows who had hold of me. I guess he was asking 'em if they thought I told the truth, and I guess they said they did, for they weren't so rough with me after that, though they didn't let me go. Instead they took me down the hall to a room where a little, undersized pip squeak was sitting cross-legged on a pile of pillows. He looked as though he'd just come off second best in a bout with a first-class scrapper, too, for his lips were cut and both eyes blackened, and there were two or three bruises on his cheeks.

"Just the same, there was something terrifying about him. I can't remember being really scared of anything since I was a little girl and lay awake in the nursery waiting for the goblins to come and grab me, and—I had just that sort of all-hot-and-weak-inside feeling when I looked into that little dark-skinned fellow's eyes. They were a sort of agate-gray, like the eyes of a bad white man set in an evil mulatto's face, and something seemed to chill me to the bone. It seemed as though his two eyes melted into one, and that one grew and grew till it was as big as the ocean, and the more I tried to look away the more I had to stare at them. All of a sudden I felt myself on my knees—can you imagine? Me on my knees to a little half-portion brown-faced man, sobbing and trembling and so scared I couldn't speak!

"He looked at me for what seemed like a year, got up and came over to me and put my hair back, examining my ears, looking at 'em and feeling 'em—as if I were a horse or something — then he turned and laced it into those three fellows who had brought me. I couldn't understand a word he said, of course, but from his tone I knew he was giving 'em the cussing of their lives, and they crouched there and took it like whipped dogs.

"After that they took me out, put me in the car again and blindfolded me, and the next thing I knew I was out on the sidewalk, right before my own door. Can you imagine?"

"Eh bien, Mademoiselle, one can imagine very well indeed; exceedingly well," de Grandin assured her. "You are a most fortunate young lady."

AS WE drove home he asked suddenly, apropos of nothing: "Does Mademoiselle Frierson remind you of any one you know, by any chance, my friend?"

"H'm, can't say she—by George, yes!" I answered. "There's a slight resemblance between her and Madeline Anspacher. They're about of a size, and both pronounced brunettes, and——"

"Assuredly," he acquiesced. "One might easily mistake one for the other if one knew neither of them well, especially if the light were indifferent."

"Then you think Karowli Singh's

servants abducted Eleanor Frierson by mistake, thinking she was Madeline?"

"Perfectly. One suspects the fox when his poultry disappears, my friend."

"Well, then, why did the rajah, for I suppose it was he to whom she was taken, examine her ears?"

"*Tiens,* to see if they were, or ever had been pierced, of course," he answered in a tone of patient resignation. "Madame Anspacher has lived some time in America; time and different environment and Western clothes might make a big difference in her looks, but the ear-ring holes bored in her lobes, the holes in which great loops of gold hung for nearly all her life, could not be hidden, neither could they have healed. Indeed, she still wears studs in her ears, as I observed last night. Mademoiselle Eleanor's ears have never been pierced for rings. I satisfied myself of that while we interviewed her."

"And that 'car-barn' or whatever it was her captor said to her—what does that mean?" I asked.

"*Kurban* is a Hindoo word denoting human sacrifice," he answered, "a sacrifice at which the victim, in order to attain forgiveness for sins committed in this or a prior incarnation, offers herself voluntarily to death."

"Good heavens, then——" I stopped aghast at the implication his words had raised.

"Precisely, exactly, quite so," he answered in a level, toneless voice. "You apprehend me perfectly, my friend."

NORA MCGINNIS, my highly efficient household factotum, has a knack of securing her own way. Devout Catholic that she is, she would as soon think of strangling a sleeping infant in its crib as of eating meat on Friday, or (though I am a vestryman in the Episcopal Church and a past potentate of the Shrine) permitting me to do so. Accordingly, the next morning de Grandin and I found the table set with baked bloaters and waffles when we descended to the breakfast room.

"*Hélas,* I am worried, I am apprehensive and distrait, I can not eat; I have no appetite, me," the little Frenchman told me dolorously as he pushed away his thrice-replenished plate and drained his fourth cup of well-creamed coffee. "Behold, it is already after nine o'clock and Monsieur Édouard has not yet telephoned. I fear for their safety, my friend. That Karowli Singh, he is a rascal of the finest brew. I know him. He is altogether and decidedly no good. While I served as captain in the army of his late and unlamented papa I had abundant opportunity to observe the present maharajah of Dhittapur, then a charming little coffee-colored brat who sadly needed cuffing. I have seen him torture helpless animals for pure love of cruelty; have a peacock plucked alive or a leopard's claws and teeth pulled out before he fought the poor beast with his sword, prodding it repeatedly with his steel until he wearied of the sport and had the maimed and helpless thing thrown to his savage dogs or clubbed to death by his grooms. *Eh bien,* yes; I know him, and I should dearly love to twist his nose."

He lighted a cigarette and blew a twin column of smoke through his nostrils toward the ceiling. "Unless they telephone soon," he began, but the cachinnating summons of the 'phone bell cut him short, and he hastened to the farther room to answer it.

"But certainly," I heard him reply to the caller's query. "And how is Madame —*mon Dieu,* you can not mean it! But certainly, right away, at once; immediately.

"Come, my friend," he bade as he re-

joined me in the breakfast room, "let us hasten, let us rush, let us fly with all expedition!"

"Where——"

"To those Durham Courts. She—Madame Anspacher—has gone away, vanished, evaporated completely."

Edward Anspacher met us in the foyer of his apartment, wonder and apprehension struggling for mastery of his features. "We were both pretty well tired with packing and making preparations for our trip," he told us, "and I think Madeline fell asleep at once. I know I did. I was so tired I overslept, for I remember distinctly that the clock was striking nine when I woke up with a raging toothache.

"Madeline was sleeping peacefully as a child and I hated to disturb her; so I got up quietly as possible and went into the bathroom for some aspirin. I couldn't have been five minutes, altogether, but when I came back she was gone, and my toothache had stopped as suddenly as it began."

"U'm?" de Grandin murmured. "You have been suffering with *mal de dents* recently, *Monsieur?*"

"No. My teeth are exceptionally healthy, and I'd finished my semi-yearly visit to the dentist last week. He told me there wasn't a sign of a cavity or diseased root anywhere; in fact, all he did was clean them. Why I should have had that sudden ache is more than I can——"

"But it is no mystery to me, my friend," the Frenchman interrupted. "I damn think it was the same sort of toothache that the tiger which frightened good Friend Trowbridge was a beast—a juggler's trick, by blue!"

The room was in confusion. Two wardrobe trunks, one a man's, one a woman's, stood on end by the door, and beside them rested several kit-bags and suitcases. On the chaise-longue at the bed's foot lay a woman's tan polo coat and a knitted silk-and-wool sports dress, neatly folded. A pair of brown suède oxfords stood toe to toe on the floor beneath, dark-brown silk stockings neatly rolled in rings beside them. Beige crêpe step-ins, bandeau and garter belt reposed beside the dress, and a pair of pigskin gloves with purse to match and a hat of brown felt were on the bureau beside a packed, but open, case of toilet accessories.

"Everything else is packed," young Anspacher told us with a nod toward the feminine apparel. "Madeline laid those things out to travel in. She must have gone out in her pajamas, for nothing else is missing—even her mules are here," he indicated a pair of frivolous black-crêpe sandals on the floor beside the bed.

"U'm?" repeated Jules de Grandin musingly, walking toward the bedroom's single window. Parting the pale gold silk-gauze curtains he looked down to the cement-paved areaway beneath. "Ten meters, at the least," he estimated, "and no sign of—*ah? A-a-ah? Que diable?*

"Observe this, if you will be so kind, Friend Trowbridge," he commanded. "What is it, if you please?"

"H'm," I examined the object he had lifted from the sill wonderingly, "I'm hanged if I know. It looks like a strand of hair—human hair, I'd say if it weren't for——" I broke off, regarding his find with bewilderment.

"Yes—yes?" he prompted tartly. "If it were not for what you would classify it as which, my old one?"

"Why, the color," I replied. "It's blue, and——"

"Precisely, it is blue, but if it were brown or black or white, or any color save blue or green or purple, you would say that it is human?" he pressed.

"Yes, I think I should."

"And you should be right. It *is* human hair, my friend."

"Blue human hair?" I replied incredulously.

"Blue hair; blue human hair, no less. Have you ever seen such hair before; do not you know its use?"

"No, I can't say I have——" I began, but Edward Anspacher interrupted:

"*I've* seen blue hair; *I* know its use!" he burst out suddenly. "The fakirs in India when they do their famous rope trick use a strand of human hair dyed blue. I've seen 'em use those ropes in Benares when the pilgrims come to bathe and——"

"*Tu parles, mon vieux,*" de Grandin told him, "and what was it that they did with them?"

"Why, the fakir would uncoil his rope and swish it round his head like a lasso, then toss it up in the air, pronouncing an incantation, and the thing would stand there, straight and rigid as a pole. An assistant would climb up it and disappear, then suddenly reappear and slide down to the ground. Do you"—he broke off as though ashamed to put his guess in words—"do you suppose there's really anything *to* that trick—anything but mere optical illusion, I mean? I've seen it worked dozens of times, but——"

"*Eh bien,* here is one time you did not see it worked, but it was apparently successful," de Grandin interrupted dryly. "Yes, *mon pauvre,* I think that there is decidedly more than mere optical illusion to that trick. How they do it I do not know, any more than they know why a voice comes from the empty air when we dial a radio machine; our science is a tight-shut book to them, theirs is equally inscrutable to us; but I make no doubt that the ache which came into your sound and healthy tooth and roused you from your sleep, driving you from your bed to seek an anodyne, was a fakir's trick, and I also have no doubt that while you ministered to your tootchache which was no toothache at all they threw their cursed blue rope up into the air, climbed it and abstracted *Madame* your wife from her bed."

"Good God!" exclaimed young Anspacher.

"Precisely," nodded Jules de Grandin gravely. "Prayers for her are in order, *Monsieur.*" Then:

"And so is action, by damn it! Me, I shall seek the good Costello and enlist his services. We shall turn this city inside out—take it to pieces bit by little bit, but we shall find her, and there shall we find him. Then"—he smiled unpleasantly—"then Jules de Grandin shall deal with the human reptile as he would with one which crawls upon its belly!"

DETECTIVE SERGEANT COSTELLO of the Harrisonville police force, Captain Chenevert of the State Constabulary and Jules de Grandin bent above the assessor's map in the county building. "Somewhere inside this circle it will be," the Frenchman declared, tapping the chart with his pencil point. "Mademoiselle Frierson declares it was here that she was seized by Karowli Singh's agents, after which, according to her reckoning, she was driven rapidly for some twenty minutes. It is unlikely that they traveled more than sixty miles an hour; accordingly the place where she was taken lies somewhere inside the circle we have traced. Of that much we are fairly certain."

"Sure, an' we may be fairly certain a needle's hidden somewheres in a haystack, but it's a hell of a job sayin' where," Costello answered gloomily. "That circle's twenty miles acrost, Doctor

de Grandin, sor, an' that's *some* territory to find one little gur-rl in, 'specially when she's likely to be kilt unless we find her pretty quick."

The Frenchman nodded agreement, but: "That is where you and Captain Chenevert can assist in the process of elimination," he returned. "Here are dwellings indicated. You can identify most of them, and tell something of their tenants. This, for instance"—he indicated the outline of a church and its appurtenant buildings—"is a house of worship. Either you or Captain Chenevert can tell us something of the clergyman in charge. At least you can say definitely that it could not have been here that Karowli Singh was when Mademoiselle Frierson was brought to him by mistake for Madame Anspacher. *N'est-ce-pas?*"

"Sure, I git ye," Costello answered. "I don't know every one whose house is indicated on th' plat, neither does th' Captain, but between us we can git th' necessary information, I from th' city policemen on th' beats, an' he from th' throopers who patrol those parts o' th' country outside th' city limits. How long can ye give us fer to git th' dope, sor?"

De Grandin consulted the watch strapped to his wrist. "It is now half-past two," he answered. "I do not think that they will start their devilment before sundown. Report to me at half-past six at least, and we can then plan our strategy. You agree?"

"Surest thing ye know, sor," the big detective answered; then, to Captain Chenevert:

"Let's git goin', sor; we've a power o' wor-rk to do, an' divilish little time to do it in, I'm thinkin'."

"ARRAH, Doctor de Grandin, sor, it's dead I thought ye were entirely when I seen them big, black shiny cars all parked in th' side yard," declared Costello when he and Captain Chenevert called with their report. "Phwat's th' idea of all th' funeral scenery, if I may ask?"

"I should be desolated if you failed to do so," the Frenchman answered with a grin. "We have a still hunt to make tonight. Somewhere in a quite extensive territory there is secreted a single small woman and we do not know how many miscreants who are spoiling for a slight degree of killing. We must take them by surprize, or all is lost, for they will surely murder her if they realize we are near. Very good. It is, therefore, doubly necessary that we do not advertise our advent. Did we go upon our expedition in police cars and motorcycles we might as well march in battalion formation with field music. Accordingly I have borrowed from Monsieur Martin, the amiable mortician, six limousines, each capable of carrying eight passengers in comfort. These cars will cruise the country over and create no comment. You apprehend my strategy?"

"True fer ye, sor," the sergeant complimented, and Captain Chenevert nodded approbation, "there was one dam' fine policeman lost when ye decided to retire from th' wor-rk."

"*Tiens,* priests, soldiers, doctors and policemen never retire, my friend," de Grandin answered with a smile. "They may enter other lines of work, but always, underneath, they cling all tightly to the instincts of their one-time calling."

SO CAREFULLY had Costello and Chenevert canvassed their respective divisions of the suspected territory that only ten or a dozen buildings remained on their lists of possibilities. These were mostly vacant residences, deserted factories or houses whose occupants were known or suspected of having traffic with

the underworld. It was agreed that a limousine loaded with policemen and state troopers should go immediately to each place, the officer in charge of each detachment being armed with a John Doe search warrant. If no signs of Madeline Anspacher or the retinue of Karowli Singh were found, the cars were to return to their rendezvous at my house, where further strategy would be planned.

An hour, two, passed, and one by one the cars returned, each with reports of failure. Eight strokes were sounding on the Town Hall tower clock when the final car drove up, and de Grandin, the two officers, young Edward Anspacher and I gathered in the study for a council of war.

"Looks like we skipped a bet, afther all," Costello began wearily. "Maybe if ye'd 'a' drawn yer circle wider, sor——"

"*Attendez!*" de Grandin's sharp admonition broke him off. "What place is this, *mes amis?*" he pointed to a sketch upon the map. "Has any one been there?"

"That? Why, it's old St. Malachy's Home," responded Captain Chenevert. "It was used as an orphanage twenty years ago, then turned into some sort of sanitarium for the feeble-minded, taken over as a recuperation home for sick and wounded officers during the war, and finally abandoned when the archdiocese acquired the new home over at Shelbyville. The place is just a ruin and——"

"And we shall go there *tout de suite,* by blue!" de Grandin cut in sharply. "It lies a good five miles outside our circle of suspicion, but Mademoiselle Frierson may easily have been mistaken in her calculations, and we, by damn, we can not afford to reject a single clue. Come, let us be upon our way. *En avant, mes braves.*"

As we drove quietly out the Albemarle Road toward the deserted orphanage, we passed a group of greenhouses, and de Grandin called a halt.

"*Monsieur,* is it that you have the *souci*—how do you call him? the marigold—here?" he asked the florist.

"Plenty," the other answered. "Want a couple o' dozen?"

"A dozen? Two? *Mais non,* I will take your entire stock, and quickly, if you please," replied the Frenchman. "Give them to us right away, immediately, at once, if you will be so kind."

"What the devil——" Captain Chenevert began wonderingly as de Grandin distributed the tawny blooms to each member of the raiding-party with injunctions to wear them fastened to their blouses.

"To circumvent the Evil One and his sworn assistants, my friend," the little Frenchman answered. "Tonight we go out against those who fight with weapons of the flesh and of the spirit also. I would not have it said that we were unprepared."

SILENTLY as a fleet of gondolas our motorcade swept out the broad turnpike, circled the rise of ground on which the half-dismantled orphans' home stood, and came to a halt. De Grandin called the officers around him for a final conference before the attack. "You will see strange things, *mes enfants,*" he warned, "but do not be dismayed. Press forward steadily, and on no account discharge your weapons until you hear my whistle. You, *mon capitaine,* will take your men, form them in a crescent and proceed up the slope from the south; you, Sergeant, will please deploy your force in another half-moon and advance from the north. Doctor Trowbridge, Monsieur Anspacher and I will take three troopers and two policemen and press forward from this point. Keep in contact with us, if you

please, for we shall lead the reconnaissance.

"Should any try to pass you, you will stop them."

"Did you say *stop* 'em, sir?" asked a state trooper, dropping his hand negligently on the butt of his service pistol.

The little Frenchman grinned appreciatively. "Your judgment is unquestionably sound, *mon vieux,*" he answered. "Use it.

"When you have drawn your cordon round the house, give a soft owl's hoot," he continued. "You understand? *Bon. Allez-vous-en!*"

CAUTIOUSLY we toiled up the steep slope, taking advantage of such cover as offered, keeping our gaze fixed on the gloomy pile which crowned the hill.

Almost at the crest of the rise we paused a moment, and I thrust my gloved hand into my mouth to stifle the involuntary cry of horror which pressed against my lips. "Look—*look,* de Grandin!" I whispered fearfully. "There—there must be thousands of them!"

Coiling, twisting, hissing, writhing in a horrid living chain about the hill-top was a veritable *chevaux-de-frise* of serpents, their small eyes gleaming balefully in the pale moonlight, peaked heads rearing menacingly, forked tongues darting warning and defiance. Another forward step and we should have walked right into the venomous cordon, and I shuddered as I realized what we had escaped.

"Jeez!" cried the trooper at my right as he snatched his pistol from its holster and leveled it at the seething mass of serpents.

"Fool! Remember my commands; no shooting!" de Grandin hissed, seizing the man's wrist and twisting the muzzle of his pistol toward the ground. "Would you advertise our coming? *Regardez*——"

Plucking a marigold blossom from his lapel he tossed it into the center of the writhing snakes.

Only once before had I seen anything comparable to what resulted. That was when a careless passer-by had dropped a glowing cigarette stump into the curbside exhibit of a peddler of celluloid toys. Now, as the inflammable playthings had caught fire and vanished in a puff of flame, just so did the picket-line of snakes suddenly dissolve before us, vanishing in the twinkling of an eye, and leaving our way clear and unobstructed across the frost-jeweled grass.

"Onward, my friends; quickly, they are at their devil's work already!" the Frenchman ordered in a low, tense voice, and even as he spoke the deep, reverberant tolling of a gong sounded from the darkened house ahead.

Forward we hurried, creeping from tree trunk to tree trunk, crawling on hands and knees from bush to bush, wriggling *ventre à terre* when the cover was too scant to hide us otherwise.

The big old house was dark as Erebus, but as we crouched by the foundation we descried a tiny beam of light leaking from a broken window, and at de Grandin's signal rose and glued our eyes to the cracked and dust-soiled pane.

The room in which we looked had evidently been used as the assembly hall, for it was as large as a small theater, and by the dim light of several oil-lamps swinging from the ceiling we could pick out every detail of the scene. A group of some twenty swart-faced turbaned men squatted tailor-fashion in a circle, while straight ahead, on a sort of dais formed of heaped-up pillows, lolled an olive-skinned young man, handsome in a sinister Oriental way, but with the weak face of a petulant, spoiled child. His head

was wrapped in a turban of shimmering silk from the front of which flashed a diamond aigret. Over his shoulders dropped a cloak of leopardskin lined with scarlet, and round his neck and on his breast lay row on row of perfectly matched pearls and emeralds. Three dark-skinned, cameo-featured women, wrapped about head and shoulders with jewel-fringed shawls of red and black, crouched on the cushions at his feet. Naked save for turban and breech-clout, an emaciated old man with the straggling beard and mocking, sardonic eyes of an old and vicious goat squatted cross-legged on a mat before the dais.

A single glance identified the young man lolling on the piled-up cushions; for once seen, that sinister, cruel face could not be forgotten, whatever type of head-gear its owner wore. It was Karowli Singh, Maharajah of Dhittapur, who held his court here — for what purpose we knew all too well.

Once again the deep-toned gong boomed sonorously, and the rajah raised his hand in signal.

The folding doors at the farther end of the room slid back noiselessly, and two black-robed, hooded women entered, leading a third between them. It was Madeline Anspacher, yet it was not Madeline Anspacher, the Christian wife of a Christian American, but Kamla Devi, the Hindoo girl, *naikin bayadère* of the Inner Temple, and wife of Vishnu, the Preserver of the Universe, who stepped with meek, bowed head into this hall of Oriental justice.

Her head was covered with a shawl, or *sari,* of gold and black which fell across her shoulders, crossed at the bosom, then trailed its jewel-adorned fringes at her feet. Between her eyes was set a tiny, fiery-red caste mark, which stood out against the pale flesh like a new wound. Great ear-rings of gold, thick-set with glowing emeralds, caressed her cheeks, a smaller hoop of gold in which a gorgeous emerald solitaire gleamed vividly was in her nose. Her arms were fairly weighted down with bracelets of raw gold close-set with flashing emeralds, and on her rounded bare ankles were broad golden bands adorned with tiny, tinkling bells and fitted with fine golden chains each of which ended in a brilliantly jeweled toe-ring.

And now she stood before the rajah, no longer with bowed head, but proudly, almost arrogantly, like a princess of the blood, straight as a candle-flame in a windless room.

For a moment she stood thus; then, hands palm to palm, fingers pointing down, she bent her head and murmured: "As the gods command I come to thee, my lord, that thou mayest do with me as thou wilt. *Ram, Sita, Ram!*"

The young man on the dais smiled. "Does Kamla Devi come as a *naikin bayadère?*" he demanded.

"Nay, dreadful lord of life and death," she answered, lifting the mantle of black and gold tissue from her head and shoulders and dropping it at her feet, "behold, with unveiled head she stands before thee like a slave. Do with her as thou wilt. *Ram, Sita, Ram!*"

"'Tis not enough," he told her. "Kamla Devi has sinned past hope of pardon. She must taste of utmost degradation."

"Hearing and obeying," she replied, and with a swift brushing motion of her hand effaced the glowing caste mark from her brow, then from round her throat unclasped the triple-stranded necklace of pearls and emeralds and dropped it on the crumpled *sari* at her feet. From her arms she swept the golden bracelets, and slipped the tinkling, bell-hung anklets

over her slim feet, laying them beside the other jewels on the discarded mantle; last of all, with a convulsive gesture she ripped the fastenings of her short, gem-embroidered jacket open, and as her breasts were bared, fell forward on her face, elbows to the floor, hands clasped above her bowed neck. As she dropped prostrate in utter self-abasement, I noticed that the palms of her hands and feet and the part in her hair were painted bright vermilion, and with a wondering start recalled hearing that Hindoo women who died before their husbands were thus adorned before the bearers took their bodies to the burning-ghat for incineration.

"As a slave of slaves Kamla Devi lies before thy feet, my lord, divested of her caste and ornaments, her bosoms bared like any casteless woman's, and makes thee offer of her forfeited life. Do with her as thou wilt. *Ram, Sita, Ram!*" she sobbed despairingly.

The aged, goat-faced man turned toward the youth upon the dais. "What shall be the punishment, O Mightiness?" he asked in a high, cracked voice.

The rajah closed his eyes in thought a moment, then answered slowly: "She is too fair to break with stones or burn with fire or smash with flailing clubs, O Holy One. I am much inclined to show her mercy. What is thy thought?"

"*Ahee,*" the old man chuckled, "the night is young and death ends everything, my lord; do not drain the cup of vengeance at a single gulp. Let her dance with Nag and Nagaina, and let this be the judgment of her sins."

"*Wah,* thou hast spoken wisely, O brother of the elephant. Let her dance with Nag and with Nagaina," said the rajah.

"Good God!" I heard young Anspacher sob hysterically. "Nag and Nagaina! That means——"

"Be still, you fool!" de Grandin hissed. "We must await the others. Name of a name, why do they not come?"

THE bearded, goat-faced man had risen and disappeared into the farther room. In a moment he returned with a pot-shaped basket of woven rushes covered with a scarlet cloth. A silken thong hung round his neck, something gruesomely like a skull dependent from it.

He set the basket down some ten feet from the girl, resumed his squatting posture at the rajah's feet and, unlooping the silk cord from his neck, began swinging the gourd—if it were a gourd—to which it was attached. Backward and forward, right, left; left, right, like a slowly oscillating pendulum he swung the bleached, skull-like sphere. He beat it as it swung, striking short, light taps with finger-tips and palms alternately, and it sounded with a hollow, melancholy murmur, a clucking, syncopated sort of rhythm, every seventh beat accentuated:

"*Tock,* tock-a-tock-a, tock—
Tock, tock-a-tock-a, tock . . ."

Monotonously, insistently, endlessly the pounding rhythm sounded:

"*Tock,* tock-a-tock-a, tock—
Tock, tock-a-tock-a, tock . . ."

He stared at the rush basket with fixed, hot eyes, and presently the red cloth on its top stirred slightly, as though lifted by a vagrant breath of wind.

"*Tock,* tock-a-tock-a, tock . . ."

The red cloth stirred again, slipped back an inch or so, and a flat, wedge-shaped head, set with little, gleaming eyes of green, reared from the opening. Another rose beside it, and now we saw the lamplight glitter evilly on the gray-

white scalings of snakes' bellies as two giant cobras, one male, one female, writhed across the basket's lip, dropped thudding to the floor and coiled with upreared heads and outspread hoods, as though seeking to locate the throbbing drum.

"Rise and dance, O Kamla Devi; rise and dance with Nag and Nagaina, and sing the snake-song to them as you dance. Sing long, my little nightingale, sing well, little thrush, sing sweetly, little linnet of the slim, white throat, for when you cease to sing you die," laughed Karowli Singh, and as he spoke the drum's soft sobbing ceased, and a silence like the silence of the tomb seemed rushing in to fill the air to overflowing.

"S-s-s-sss!" The great male cobra, Nag, coiled itself, its green eyes flashing evilly, its darting tongue signalling its anger. Then slowly it lowered its head and glided swiftly forward toward the girl's white feet.

"S-s-s-sss!" Nagaina, the female, joined her mate, and twisted her gleaming coils across the floor.

Kamla Devi leaped into the air with the litheness of an acrobat, landing with a little thudding sound some three feet from the snakes, and as she poised on slender, outspread toes, she pirouetted slowly, and from her parted lips there came a chant, a rising, falling, faintly surging and receding monotonous singsong; raucous, metallic—like the music of a snake-charmer's pipe.

The hooded reptiles paused, reared their heads, and seemed to listen. Suddenly, from right and left, as though by concerted agreement, they raised their heads still higher, opened their jaws till the deadly poison-fangs gleamed whitely in the lamplight, and struck.

The girl rose upward in a soaring leap, and the driving, venom-laden heads passed like twin lightning strokes beneath her, missing her feet by less than three scant inches.

We heard the serpents hiss with fury as they missed their stroke, saw them lengthen out, then coil again, one to the left, the other to the right.

Louder, more insistently, rose the chanting, whining wail, and again the snakes poised doubtfully, reddish-black tongues shooting out between blue-black lips, heads swaying as they watched the whirling dancer and listened to her song.

She faltered in the chant. Her throat was getting dry. She stumbled in her step; her feet were growing heavy, and again the serpents hissed their warning-signal and struck and hissed again in fury as they missed the twinkling, fear-winged feet.

"Enough of this, *parbleu!*" de Grandin rasped. "If Costello and the captain are not ready we must take our chance against them as we are. We can not linger longer — she is tiring fast, and——"

Quaveringly, lightly through the night came the call of a screech-owl, and as it sounded Jules de Grandin drew his pistol, rested it upon the window-sill for better aim and fired.

HE SHOT with all the daintiness of precision which characterized his every act, whether it were tying his cravat, snipping off a vermiform appendix from a quivering colon or adjusting his silk hat, and as though drawn to their targets by force of magnetism, his bullets struck. Shot followed shot so closely that the second was more like a continuation than an echo of the first. But each one was effective, for ere the startled Hindoos could so much as cry a warning to each other the two cobras lay upon the floor, their gleaming, scale-clad bodies quiver-

ing in the agony of sudden death, their poison-freighted heads ripped open by the soft-nosed slugs from his revolver.

"Wh-e-ep!" The shrilling of the whistle sounded deafeningly, and as he blew a second blast there came the drumming of heavy feet upon the sagging floors, the hammer of crowbars on the rotting doors, and Captain Chenevert and his men, followed by Costello and his forces, surged into the room. De Grandin mounted to the window-sill and leaped into the house, Anspacher, the officers and I following as best we could.

Cries, shots, the crack of butt-plates on bare skulls, the flash of knives and reek of gunpowder filled the place, mingled with such strange oaths as only soldiers know as the troopers and policemen drove the Hindoos to the wall and held them there.

"Belly th' wall, ye monkey-faced omadhauns," Costello ordered. "Th' first one as tur-rns round gits a mouthful o' teeth pushed down 'is throat!"

The captives cowered cringingly, all but the maharajah. Scoundrel he was, heartless, unscrupulous, degenerate; but no coward.

"Bhowanee blast thee, Siva smite thee with his wrath!" he screamed at Jules de Grandin, his face gone gray with rage at thwarted vengeance. "Could I but meet thee man to man——"

"Tiens, my little vicious one, that can be easily arranged," the Frenchman interrupted. "Though you showed little liking for fair play when you held this poor girl within your power, I will give you one last chance to fight, and——

"Take them outside," he ordered, motioning to the maharajah's suite. "But leave this one to me. He and I have business to transact."

"Shall we wait? Will ye be comin' soon, sor?" Costello asked.

"But certainly, my friend; either that or——" he raised his shoulders in a shrug as he selected two keen-edged simitars dropped in the mêlée and thrust them point-downward in the center of the floor. "Friend Trowbridge will remain to see fair play," he added. "Should he come forth accompanied only by this one" —he nodded toward the rajah—"I beseech you to permit him to depart in peace and unmolested. Me, I shall not come out alone, I do assure you. Go out, my friends, for I am anxious to have done."

"Is it to be a dool?" Costello asked.

"More like an execution—but not of the death sentence; that would be too easy," the Frenchman answered. "Now go and leave me to my work.

"En garde!" he ordered sharply as the officers went out with their prisoners. "Karowli Singh, thou son and grandson of a stinking camel, if you defeat me you go free; if not I take such vengeance as is just!"

Like savage cats they faced each other, circling slowly round, eyes gleaming with as pitiless a glint as that their weapons caught from the uncertain lamplight.

Suddenly the rajah charged, simitar swinging like a whirling windmill — I heard the curved blade whistle through the air. De Grandin gave ground rapidly, skipping lightly back, making no attempt to meet his adversary's steel.

The Hindoo's white teeth flashed in a snarling smile. "Coward, poltroon, craven!" he taunted. "The gods fight with me; I, their chosen one——"

"Will choose no more to torture helpless beasts and women, I damn think!" the Frenchman interrupted. *"Cochon va!"*

The trick was worked so quickly that I could not follow it; but it seemed as if he drove straight forward with his blade,

then slacked his thrust in mid-stab and cut a slashing S-shaped gash in the air before the other's face. Whatever the technique, the result was instant, for the rajah's sword seemed to fly from his hand as though he flung it from him, and a second later de Grandin raised his point and dashed his hilt into the other's mouth, sending him sprawling to the floor.

"Thy gods fight with thee, *hein?*" he queried mockingly. "*Pardieu,* I think that you and they alike are helpless when opposed by Jules de Grandin!"

From an inner pocket of his jacket he drew forth a gleaming instrument and leant above his foe. "Look for the last time on the world you know, thou *sacré singe!*" he ordered, and drove the hypodermic needle deep into the other's arm.

"What are you doing?" I demanded. "You promised——"

"I promised freedom if he won; I did not say what I should do if I prevailed," he interrupted coldly, putting the hypo carefully away in its black-leather case.

"What was the injection?"

"A little drug from his own country," he replied. "*Gunga,* it is sometimes called, though it contains other things than hashish. It is the justice of poetry that he should receive it, is it not? Behold how quickly it accomplishes its end."

I looked, and as I looked a chill ran through me. Karowli Singh was sitting on the floor, a silly, vacuous smile upon his face. Saliva dribbled from the corners of his mouth, his tongue hung out flaccidly, pendulously, across his chin, and he kept putting up his hands to stuff it back into his mouth, giggling as he did so. No doctor—no second-year medical student—could misread the signs. Complete, incurable, terminal dementia was stamped upon his features.

"Will—will he recover?" I asked in an awed whisper, knowing all the time what the answer must inevitably be.

"*Eh bien,* in hell perhaps; never in this world," de Grandin replied negligently. "Come, let us send Costello in to him, and—have you any idea how soon we can reach home? Me, I am most vilely thirsty for a drink."

Ashes of Eden

By KIRK MASHBURN

See, pale wraiths! A pledge to you,
This lifted cup of bitter brew.
Aye! Dead, once-dear Loves of mine,
I pledge these lees of Life's sour wine.

Ah! You whisper. . . . Say you so?
Little of bitter dregs you know!
Dead things reck no more of pain—
Mayhap the Dust is Life's true gain.

"Not so easy to stop me this time, eh?" came from his sneering lips.

The Vampire Airplane

By ARLTON EADIE

Count Fedor von Felhagen died gloriously, shot down from the sky in aerial battle—but what was that thing in his semblance that shattered the peace and quiet of an English country home?

"WHAT'S that?"

Brander Cardwell paused in the act of raising his wine-glass to his lips, and his short, thick-set figure stiffened into an attitude of listening tension. From somewhere in the distance a low sustained droning sound had floated to his ears during a sudden lull in the heavy gusts of wind which beat against the leaded casements of Chelhurst Grange.

"Sounds like an airplane," Brander Cardwell went on, his gray brows bunched in a puzzled frown as his eyes searched the faces of the two men seated at the great oak table.

Roderick Merton, the somewhat good-looking private secretary, looked up and met the old man's glance with a careless smile.

"If the night were calmer I should say that you were right, Mr. Cardwell," Mer-

ton said with the air of one discussing a familiar topic. "But it would be a bold and skilful pilot who would venture up in weather like this. It's blowing a full gale outside, and the sky is black as pitch. Probably the sound you heard was made by a high-powered car crossing the Downs to the seacoast."

The third man present slowly drained his glass before he turned to the speaker. The Honorable Eric Chalmers had great ideas about keeping paid servants in their proper places, and now there was the suspicion of a covert sneer on his thin lips as he asked:

"Bit too breezy for your liking, eh?" His voice was a languid drawl. "Maybe *you* wouldn't care to venture up on a night like this?"

"I'll allow right now that I would *not* —and when I say that you can cut out the 'maybe'!" Rod Merton answered emphatically, a frank but not very friendly expression in his keen gray eyes.

"Really?" The Honorable Eric refilled his glass and gazed critically at its amber contents as he held it to the light of the shaded table lamp. "I always thought you wonderful flying fellers from the other side of the Atlantic weren't scared of a bit of wind like this."

"I've flown in worse gales than this, Mr. Chalmers, and on occasions when the wind was not the only, or the greatest, danger," Rod returned quietly. "But that was during the war, and life was cheaper then than it is now."

"Really? Ah, yes, I was forgetting your jolly little stunts when you were a wing commander in the American air force." Chalmers' carefully cultivated drawl was always irritating to the ex-airman, but just then it had the quality of being intentionally offensive as he went on: "By Jove, it must be a frightful come-down for a famous flying ace to have his wings clipped and hop about on the ground as a tame private secretary."

The insult was too gross to be misunderstood or overlooked. A sudden flush of anger mounted to the face of the young American and his brows lowered into an ominous straight line. But before he could voice the stinging retort which rose to his lips, Brander Cardwell caused a diversion by dashing to the window and drawing back the heavy tapestry curtain.

"Look!" he cried, pointing excitedly upward. "It's a plane, and it's circling almost directly over this house! I can see the lights — they're flickering. His engine must be failing."

"I guess not, sir." Rod Merton had crossed the room with rapid strides and was now looking over the old man's shoulder. "I can tell by the regular humming that the engine is running smooth as velvet. But the pilot's in trouble of some sort—the intermittent flashing of the navigation lights which you see is the recognized signal that a pilot is compelled to land. It's up to us to show him a safe place."

The Honorable Eric came sauntering across to the window and, carefully adjusting his single eyeglass, stared up at the red and green lights which were winking high up in the gusty darkness.

"Show him a safe place?" he repeated blankly. "Oh, I say, how the deuce can we show him anything on a night like this?"

"Yes—how?" echoed Brander, glancing round.

Rod's finger was already on the bell-push.

"Light up every window to show the position of the house," he jerked out crisply. "Flood the largest lawn with the light of the head-lamps of the cars in the garage. I'll tell him that there's a safe landing-ground due south of the lights."

"Tell him?" Chalmers gave a fatuous laugh. "He'll never hear your voice."

"But he'll see the Morse signal that I'm going to flash," the airman broke in impatiently. "Shall I order the cars to be brought round on the lawn? Every second may be precious if that plane has developed trouble."

"Yes, yes—of course. Do whatever you think necessary." The old man's voice was jerky with suppressed excitement. "Please give your orders without consulting me, Mr. Merton. You know best what is to be done in an emergency like this."

IN A flash the American airman had dropped his status of a private secretary and become the dominant figure of the situation. In crisp accents of authority that brooked no argument, he rapped out orders to the startled servants who came flocking into the room in response to the continued whirring of the bell. The next few minutes saw liveried and powdered footmen careering through the corridors of the ancient grange at a speed much in excess of their customary dignified progress; while the portly butler, much to his surprize, found himself hurriedly performing tasks which he usually delegated to his underlings.

Without waiting for the chauffeur to be brought from his quarters, Rod steered the big Daimler to the edge of the lawn and switched on the head-lamps. Then, while willing hands were bringing the other cars into position by its side, he took a large mirror from the entrance hall and, adjusting it so as to deflect the vivid glare upward, quickly sent a succession of long and short flashes to the plane hovering overhead. Almost immediately the droning of the tractor ceased as the pilot cut out his engine for the downward glide. The green and red navigation lights widened and grew brighter as the unknown machine planed toward the square of level grass lawn that was now flooded with the white glare from the head-lamps of every available car, and presently an answering glare lit up the low-lying clouds as the pilot made electrical contact with a white pyrotechnical light fastened to the wing-tip of the descending plane.

"Is there any danger, Mr. Merton?"

The low-voiced, anxious question caused the ex-airman to turn quickly. Outlined against the dim reflected light was the slender girlish figure of Hetty Cardwell, the daughter of his employer. She had thrown a fur-trimmed wrap over her light evening frock, but her head was bare, and the unchecked wind was tossing the swathes of her corn-gold hair in an unstudied but strangely fascinating confusion. Merton caught the faint shimmer of a row of priceless pearls about the perfect curve of her throat, and he sensed rather than actually saw the tense expression on her upturned face as she watched the downward sweep of the wind-tossed plane.

"Danger, Miss Cardwell?" Rod Merton shrugged. "Well, I can't exactly say without knowing what his trouble is. But he seems to have his machine well in hand, and I reckon he'll make his landing all right, now that we've shown him a stretch as level as a billiard table. It might have been a different story if he had been forced to take his chance on the rough ground of the open downs, or had been swept out to sea. It's lucky for him that some one was handy who was able to read his signals."

"Can't we do anything to help them?" cried the girl as a violent gust of wind sent the plane soaring at what seemed a perilous angle. "It's maddening to stand

here helpless knowing that lives are in danger."

Rod shook his head.

"That's a single-seater plane, Miss Cardwell, and you can rest assured that there are no passengers aboard. Anyway, we've done everything it's possible to do from the ground. It's up to the pilot to do the rest. But he'll make it all right if he's worth his salt at the game—and I guess he's no novice to be up on a night like this."

"Maybe he's an Air Force officer?" she suggested.

"I guess not," the American answered with swift decision. "When he touched off his wing-flare just now I saw the machine had no red-and-blue rings on its planes or rudder. It's a privately owned foreign machine."

"How can you tell that?" Hetty asked, lowering her gaze and looking full at Merton for the first time since they had been speaking.

"I caught a glimpse of the letters on the fuselage; they are H-MKCF. The first letter is the nationality mark, and the other four are the registration. The initial letter, taken with the first letter of the registration combination, together forms a sort of code which indicates the nationality of any aircraft. In the present instance the letters are H and M, showing that it is a Hungarian plane."

The girl's shining eyes widened slightly as she regarded the speaker with what seemed a new and deeper interest.

"Just fancy you knowing all those things, Mr. Merton," she cried in mingled surprize and admiration.

The young ex-aviator's shoulders lifted in a slight shrug as he turned away.

"The time is not far distant when it was my duty to know all about those things," he answered, and there was a note of suppressed bitterness in his voice.

The renewed zooming overhead told that the pilot was running his engine full out in an endeavor to regain his former position in the teeth of the gale. Yet for a few breathless moments it seemed that the machine was making no headway. It was now directly facing the patch of illuminated lawn, its only safe landing-place, and from where Merton stood he could see its three navigation lights poised almost motionless in the black, windy void. Then, with the swiftness of a falling stone, it dived downward and forward. The noise of its tractor swelled rapidly to a deafening roar, and another white flare burst into blinding radiance from the extremity of its wing.

The machine was rushing earthward like a sheet of metal skimming through the air. It seemed as if nothing could prevent it from being hurled, a mass of twisted and crumpled wreckage, at his very feet. A sudden clutch of horror assailed Merton's heart as he watched that mad, headlong sweep. The pilot was about to take the ground at full speed!

"Either he's a reckless fool or the bravest man I've ever met!" Rod muttered between his set teeth. "He must imagine he bears a charmed life!"

Now Merton could see the pilot clearly, a motionless figure in goggles and black leather helmet, crouching in his cockpit. But, for all his apparent inaction, his hands must have been busy at the controls, for he steered his machine straight as an arrow toward the section of smooth lawn.

Rod Merton set his teeth and waited in an agony of helpless suspense for the crash that seemed inevitable. He had seen high-speed racing-planes—machines heavily loaded and with proportionately small wing area, which will bear their weight only so long as high speed is maintained—he had seen such alight at ninety

miles an hour, but only on specially prepared grounds and in perfect flying-weather. No pilot in his right senses would take the ground from deliberate choice with his engine running full-throttle. Heavens! was the man never going to shut off and flatten out?

Down—down—down rushed the flying monster in a crazy dive which threatened destruction to the knot of onlookers gathered by the edge of the lawn.

"Take cover! Run for your lives!" Merton shouted to the group of gaping servants. At the same moment he caught the girl round the waist and with a quick movement swung her behind the trunk of one of the ancient elms.

"That madman's heading for a crash," he raised his voice above the increasing din; "I reckon one funeral is enough at a time."

But even as he shouted the words, the savage roar of the propellers sank to a complacent purr; the downward nose-dive flattened out at the last possible moment into a leisurely hovering flight; the wheels of the under-carriage made contact with the smooth-shaven grass with scarcely a jar, and a few moments later the strange plane had come to a standstill and the pilot had vaulted lightly to the ground.

ROD MERTON crossed the lawn at a run. "Excuse me, stranger," he said in a voice that was still a trifle unsteady. "Was that just a lucky fluke, or do you always make stunt landings like that? If so, then I reckon you must hold your life pretty cheap!"

The unknown pilot removed his goggles and helmet with an elaborate sweep that was almost a ceremonious bow. He was tall above the average, and made a somewhat imposing figure in his tight-fitting suit of black leather. His features were regular and might have been accounted handsome had it not been for their death-like pallor and the curious, indefinable expression which lurked in his dark, deep-set eyes. A slight smile twitched the corners of his marble lips at the young American's unceremonious greeting, and his leather-clad shoulders lifted in a little shrug.

"Believe me, sir," he answered in excellent English, "of all my possessions my life is the thing that I value least."

"So it seems!" Rod returned with a grim laugh. "When I'm tired of life I'll ask you to give me a trip in your suicide plane. If I had known that you were hankering after a crash I wouldn't have gone to such trouble to show you a safe landing-place."

The stranger stepped forward and with a quick, impulsive movement grasped the hand of the American. In spite of himself Rod felt a shudder of unreasoning repulsion pass through him at the touch of the other's fingers. The flesh felt unnaturally damp and icy cold, like that of a man on the very point of death.

"Are you hurt?—ill?" he asked, but the stranger shook his head and withdrew his hand quickly.

"No, no—that is—a little shaken maybe," the man's disjointed utterances betrayed some confusion. He fixed his dark eyes earnestly on the secretary's face as he went on: "Please forget what I said just now. I have had a rough journey, and I must ask you to make allowances."

Rod's answering nod was ready and unsuspicious.

"Sure," he agreed. "It's a bad night for flying, and I take it you've come a long journey?"

The stranger nodded silently.

"From Hungary?" Rod went on.

Again the stranger nodded, but this

time his piercing eyes shot a swift, suspicious glance.

"How did you guess that?" he asked with an indifference that was slightly overdone.

"I wasn't guessing," answered Merton. "The letters on your machine told me all I wanted to know about your nationality."

"Ah! So you understand aircraft?"

"I'll say I do," smiled Rod. "I used to be a pilot in the regular air force."

The unknown bowed. "I am honored to make your acquaintance. I have encountered a fair number of your comrades in the past, but"—he paused and again his lips curved in that slow, strange smile—"I regret to say that the only compliments we were permitted to exchange were nickel-coated ones."

"I see." Rod gave a nod of understanding. "You flew an enemy plane during the war. In that case we might have met before?"

"Possibly," shrugged the foreigner. "but at any rate we don't seem to have done each other much harm. Happily we can approach each other on a friendlier footing now, and I have no hesitation in throwing myself on the hospitality of my former foe. If you will kindly permit me to rest a while in your house before continuing my journey, and lend me a few gallons of petrol, you will add two more debts of gratitude to the one which I already owe you for assisting me to land in safety."

For a moment the young American was taken aback by this elaborate and stilted expression of gratitude.

"That's all right, sir," he replied somewhat awkwardly. "You're more than welcome to the little assistance I was able to give. But you seem to have got things a bit wrong. This house doesn't belong to me; I only act as private secretary to its owner."

"His name?" A subtle change seemed to have affected the stranger's manner as he jerked out the question in the tone of one accustomed to command.

"Mr. Brander Cardwell."

"Please be good enough to take me to him."

With a curt, "Follow me," Rod Merton turned on his heel and led the way toward the house. Close behind him, his lithe, sable-clad figure held with stiff, military erectness, his piercing eyes darting quick glances right and left, a faint, inscrutable smile on his pallid lips, the unknown airman entered the castellated gates of Chelhurst Grange.

2

ALTHOUGH Brander Cardwell made no secret of his humble origin, and openly boasted that he had made his pile by the combined exertion of muscle and brain, he was not entirely lacking in those social aspirations which so frequently intrigue the *nouveau riche*. Nothing would have pleased him better than to crash into the best and most exclusive circles in the same manner as he had crashed into wealth. He had wit enough to see that the same methods would not suffice, but he brought the same perseverance to the task. He paid a fabulous sum for Chelhurst Grange simply because it was the show-place of the county, and because its ownership conferred some degree of reflected fame. With infinite pains and the employment of a noted master of elocution he managed to eliminate his North-country accent in his ordinary conversation, though strange-sounding words would occasionally slip out in moments of excitement. He had lavished a small fortune on the education of his only child, Hetty, even going as far as engaging the services of a real duchess (who had fallen

on evil days) in order that the girl should do naturally the things which he accomplished only by playing a part. "A real lady" was what he had desired to make her, and he honestly thought he had succeeded. His dearest wish of all was that she should marry a titled aristocrat; but so far the girl herself had not evinced any yearnings in that direction.

The old man was leaning his broad shoulders against the carved chimney-piece in the Great Hall, his short, sturdy legs set wide apart and his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his dinner jacket, when Rod Merton conducted the stranded airman into his presence. No one seeing the old man in that attitude could possibly mistake him for anything else than the owner of the house. Without hesitation the stranger advanced to Brander, came to a halt before him with a smart click of his heels and bowed from the waist in a stiff, foreign fashion.

"Permit me to introduce myself, sir," he said, and held out a visiting-card in his gauntleted hand.

A subtle change came over the old man's expression as his eyes fell on the neatly engraved coat of arms, surmounted by a tiny coronet, which decorated one corner of the slip of white pasteboard.

GRAF FEDOR VON FELHAGEN
SCHLOSS FELHAGEN
TORZBURG, HUNGARY

Brander read the copperplate lettering with shining eyes. A nobleman!—a count!—a titled aristocrat! Clearly he must lose no time in improving his acquaintance with this lordly airman who had dropped on his doorstep from the skies.

"I trust you are none the worse for your rough experience, Count?" he beamed. "We thought your machine was going to conk when we saw your S. O. S. Engine trouble, I suppose? Tricky things — petrol engines. Don't understand 'em myself. Give me steam every time. You've had a tidy hop if you've come straight from your home town."

Count Fedor shrugged slightly.

"I've come fifteen hundred miles altogether, but I flew by easy stages. My last halt was at Mayence, on the Rhine. I only came down for an hour or so, to make some slight adjustment to my engine, and I did not wait to refuel. I thought I had sufficient petrol to carry me the remainder of my journey, but this unexpected gale delayed me and ran things very close. My tanks were running dangerously low when I crossed the Sussex coast line—they would have been dry long before I reached the Croydon Aerodrome. I thought it best to risk a blind landing in the dark. Luckily for me there was an experienced aviator in the neighborhood."

He inclined his dark head toward Rod.

"Thanks to his prompt action, I am here safe and sound to tender my thanks in person and to apologize for my enforced intrusion. However, a few gallons of petrol will take me on my way and——"

Brander Cardwell held up a swift protesting hand.

"But, my dear Count, I really can not allow you to leave us so soon," the old man cried with hearty, if somewhat self-conscious, hospitality. "You must be dead-tired by your long flight—and half famished, too, I'll wager. Coming from Hungary, it's only natural that you should be hungry. Ha, ha!—my little joke, you know—Hungary—hungry."

The count's pale lips drew back in the smile that was evidently expected of him. Rod Merton, standing in silence with his eyes fixed on the newcomer's features,

caught the gleam of two rows of white, sharp-pointed teeth. To him the count's facial contortion appeared less like a polite society smile than the grin of a famished wolf.

"My house is at your disposal, Count," Brander resumed, apparently gratified by his new-found guest's ready appreciation of the elephantine humor of the jest. "I simply refuse to hear of your taking the air again until you've had a good meal and a good night's rest. Of course you can't get your usual meals when you're in the air?"

A curious light flashed momentarily in the count's somber eyes.

"No," he answered with a strange deliberation. "I can not obtain my accustomed food while I'm on the wing, as you say. I could not eat when I halted at Mayence, either; there was nothing there that suited my taste. Here, however, it seems that I shall be more fortunate."

Rod glanced sharply at the speaker's face and a wave of blind, unreasoning repulsion chilled his soul. The eyes of Count Fedor von Felhagen were filled with an avid glare—and they were staring fixedly at the ivory-white throat of Hetty Cardwell.

5

"EXCUSE my asking, Count, but had you any definite purpose in visiting this country? Were you going to see your friends, for instance?"

It was some two hours later, and dinner was nearing its end, when the owner of Chelhurst Grange put the tentative query to his distinguished guest. There was a sad and almost wistful look on Count Fedor's face as he shook his head.

"I fear that I'm but a lone bird of passage, Mr. Cardwell. I have few friends in the whole world, and none whatever in England."

"Oh, come, come, Count Fedor. Isn't that remark rather a slur on the present company? I'm sure you have found some good friends at Chelhurst Grange."

There was breeding and personality in the low, clear voice which spoke the words. Norma Fane was Hetty's cousin; the two girls were about the same age, and fast friends; although envious people had been heard to declare that they only went about together because their strongly contrasting types of beauty showed each to her best advantage. Hetty was fair, but Norma's hair was raven-like in more than its hue; where the light caught its waves they glinted with the rich metallic sheen of that bird's jet plumage. Black was the color of her wondrous eyes, alive with the mirrored thoughts which animated the quick mind behind. Black, too, were the long lashes which shadowed them and at times hid their secrets from a too inquisitive world. But just then, as Norma spoke the impulsive words of half-serious reproach, her telltale eyes betrayed an interest deep enough to arrest the attention of a man much less alert than the Hungarian count.

Fedor von Felhagen had described himself as a "lone bird of passage," but it was evident that he belonged to a species not lacking in fine feathers. He had discarded his flying-kit and now appeared in evening clothes that fully deserved the much-abused adjective "immaculate," for they showed not the slightest crease to indicate their lengthy sojourn in one of the numerous leather cases which had been taken from the luggage-boot of the plane, soon after its arrival, and carried to the best guest-room, which alone was deemed worthy of so distinguished a visitor.

The count turned his eyes on Norma and the jewels of the unfamiliar foreign

order flashed many-colored fire as it swung on its crimson ribbon in response to his characteristic shrug.

"Ah, Miss Fane, even the most delightful acquaintances do not become friends in a single hour." His voice was low and sad, and its deep vibrations strangely stirred the heart of the girl to whom the words were addressed. "After all, what am I but a stranger in your midst? For all you know I may be a vulgar impostor —a fugitive from the law even. A foreign title is the usual stock-in-trade of the *chevalier d'industrie,* you know."

"Oh I say, for heaven's sake don't talk like that, dear boy," interposed the Honorable Eric. "We don't doubt your word for a minute." He had been careful to look up and verify the count's title in the *Almanach de Gotha* within a few minutes of learning the stranger's identity, but this was a detail he thought it unnecessary to mention.

There was a murmur of approval from Brander and the others as Eric made his confession of faith, but Rod Merton did not join in it. Ever since the count's arrival he had been racking his brain to recall an elusive memory, and at that moment the thing he sought had flashed unbidden to his mind.

Abruptly he glanced up and looked von Felhagen full in the face.

"You are too modest, Count," he said quietly. "You underrate your own reputation when you say that you are unknown in this country. I, for one, know who you are."

"Indeed?" The word itself was coldly indifferent, but the lips which framed it belonged to a mask of fear. Only the man himself knew the effort it cost to smooth those twitching features into the semblance of a smile. "I am not averse to having my vanity flattered by a recitation of my own fame. Pray who do you think I am?"

In the silence that followed, Rod's chair slid over the polished floor with a harsh grating sound as he pushed it back and rose to his feet.

"You are the same Kapitanleutnant Graf von Felhagen who led the Number 3 *Bombengeschwader* when the Gotha Squadron made their first daylight raid on London!"

"Truly, I am having greatness thrust upon me with both hands!" The count tried to summon a laugh to accompany his words and succeeded in producing a contortion of his lips which revealed the rows of pointed teeth. "I fear, however, that your very flattering estimate of my identity is self-contradictory. It is a matter of history that the leader of that squadron was shot down as his machine passed over the mouth of the Thames after having unloaded its bombs on the city."

"I have good reason to be aware of that fact." Rod Merton spoke quietly, but there was a note in his voice which suggested finely edged steel. "On that particular seventh of July, I was serving with the American Seaplane Patrol in the Channel. Orders were broadcast by wireless for every available machine to concentrate over the Thames estuary to bar the path of the returning raiders. I joined the seventeen seaplanes which the Naval Air Service sent up from Dunkirk. We quickly sighted the retreating enemy —twenty-two machines in a single V-shaped formation, flying at about ten thousand feet directly over the Isle of Thanet, with a single straggler low down and far behind the others. By this time two more ferry patrols had joined us, winging in from the blue like sea-vultures eager for the kill, making up our strength to a round score of Allies to twenty-two

Gothas and a cripple. We had no time to formulate a plan of attack, and even if we had it would have been useless. The Huns scattered in all directions the moment they saw their line of retreat threatened. It was machine against machine, and after the first burst of firing, every pilot was busy with his own particular dog-fight.

"One of the enemy three-seaters dived between me and the next plane, its twin air-screws zooming like a cyclone, its three machine-guns in full blast. As his ugly, red-painted snout came abreast, the stream of lead began to crackle about our ears. The vicious stutter of our Lewis in the rear cockpit told me that my gunner had already got to work. I swung my own gun round with open sights and waited till the great black Maltese crosses on the Gotha's seventy-two-feet span of wing were dead level. Then I let off a full drum and saw the tracer bullets smoke and crumple through the thin fabric and through the plyboard of the fuselage beyond. Abruptly the red snout dipped downward out of sight, leaving a thin trail of smoke behind it as it went. At that moment our engine gave a few groggy splutters and stopped. I found later that a dozen Hun bullets had passed through the fuel-tank, but at the time I spent precious minutes fussing about to find out what was wrong. Meanwhile our plane was gliding lower and lower, and when at last I switched over to the emergency gravity tank and got the engine to pick up, I found myself alongside the crippled Hun that was staggering along at the rear.

"CRIPPLE or not, I at once saw that he was a prize worth bagging. I recognized that plane the moment we came to close quarters. It bore the usual crimson snout, but there was no sign of the huge black-painted crosses marked on its white fabric. Instead, great black death's-heads grinned at me from planes, fuselage and rudder. It was the famous *jagdstaffel*—the expert and daring air-fighter whom we called the Death Ace because of the grim symbol which he insisted on carrying in place of the regulation identity mark. And the Death Ace was living up to his reputation.

"His present low altitude kept him well within range of the anti-aircraft barrage which thundered and screamed as the quick-firing batteries along the coast spat their shells aloft. Every few yards of its limping progress was punctuated by a sudden mushroom burst of white smoke, followed by an ear-splitting *kran-n-ng!* and the whine of flying shrapnel. His lower right-hand wing was a trailing tangle of canvas shreds; and the after part of his fuselage a mere mass of splintered, yellow-stained woodwork where a small H. E. projectile had scored a direct hit; the only signs of the mid-ship's gunner were a few blotches of crimson amid the wreckage. The head of the other gunner was canted stiffly upward, his goggled eyes staring unseeingly at the sky, his thumbs still pressing the trigger of his silent gun.

"But if his comrades were dead, the Death Ace himself was still very much alive. He greeted our appearance with a lively burst from his forward gun, spraying forth a stream of bullets which sent the white splinters licking up from our woodwork, and neatly sliced one of our steel stays with a loud musical *twang*. I kicked on the rudder-bar and shoved the controls hard over in a skidding turn. We came round behind him, missing his rudder by less than the half-width of our planes, and as each gun came to bear we raked his fuselage from end to end. For a moment the stricken machine hung as

though her pilot were trying to stall. Then its nose went down and it rolled slowly over, zigzagging earthward with that helpless, sickening spin which tells of a machine out of control.

" 'That's fixed him!' yelled my gunner, but even as the words left his lips, a burst of our own shrapnel exploded right underneath us. I heard the *zip-zip* of the bullets as they tore through the flooring of the cockpit. Our frail machine pranced and curveted like a frightened horse. The tail seemed to drop off and float away of its own accord. Then our machine dropped a hundred feet like a stone—stalled—glided for about a minute—dropped again and finally came to earth with its floats embedded in about ten feet of soft Thames mud.

"We managed to scramble ashore, unhurt physically but with every nerve flabby as wet catgut. I saw that we had come down on the Isle of Thanet. About a hundred yards from the shore was a group of men, some with lanterns. Stumbling in their direction, we found that they were examining the remains of the wrecked Gotha.

"At any other time I would have left them to carry on; the fortune of war had smiled on me that night, and I was in no mood to gloat over a dead or wounded enemy. But some unaccountable feeling, some instinct of morbid curiosity, prompted me to go across and look upon the face of the man who had fought his Death's-head Plane so gallantly. They had just cut the straps which secured him to his seat as I came up.

" 'He's quite dead,' said a gray-haired officer who wore the badge of the Army Medical Corps.

"I glanced through the opened tunic and saw the bullet-wound; then I looked long at the livid face. Line for line, feature for feature, the face of that dead man was as your own, Count von Felhagen, and the bullet that killed him had entered *there!*"

And Rod Merton, leaning quickly across the table, pointed with his outstretched finger to the left center of the count's immaculate shirt-front.

4

THE company around the table had followed the American's vivid narrative with breathless interest; during the deep silence which followed the unexpected and dramatic conclusion, every eye was turned on the man who was the central figure in the story.

The long recital had given Count von Felhagen time in which to regain his composure. His face was impassive as a marble mask; his only sign of emotion was the long, shuddering sigh which he allowed to escape his lips. For a few seconds he sat in thoughtful silence; then:

"Ah, so that was how my brother met his death?" he said so softly that it seemed as if he were unconsciously voicing his thoughts.

Rod Merton started as if he had been stung. "Your brother?" he cried incredulously.

"My elder brother, whom I succeeded to the title," the count explained in a smooth voice which now betrayed not the slightest trace of emotion. "It was he who commanded the bombing squadron which raided London on the date you mentioned, Mr. Merton, and it was he who crashed to earth under your hail of bullets."

"But—his name was Fedor——"

"The same as my own," interrupted Felhagen with curt indifference. "It is a family name, assumed with the title of *Graf* as a matter of hereditary custom. Though it may lead to confusion of iden-

tity, we still retain the custom as one of the traditions of our ancient race."

"Your brother bore a very strong resemblance to you," Rod muttered dubiously.

"Naturally," came the reply, after the slightest hesitant pause. "To all intents and purposes we were twins, born at a single birth; a mere matter of minutes decided which of us should be the heir and which the cadet. Is it then so wonderful that we should be alike? Your story has been most interesting to me." Slumbering fires seemed to awaken in the count's cold eyes as he gazed fixedly at the ex-airman. "It has long been my desire to meet the man who killed my brother. Not that I bear malice," he added quickly. "*C'est la guerre,* as our neighbors were in the habit of saying. War is war—not a game of chess. A cook, however skilful, can not make an omelet without breaking eggs, and a general, however humane, can not fight a battle without loss of life. Happily, all that is over now."

"You're right, Count," Brander Cardwell interposed heartily. "All that sort of thing is over and done with. A wise nation buries its hatred with its fallen sons."

"Hear! hear!" drawled the Honorable Eric from the other end of the table. "It always gives me a beastly headache to talk about the war. For heaven's sake let the dead rest quietly in the place where they belong. We don't want them fooling around here, do we, Hetty?" He turned with a wink and a smirk to the girl at his side. "The housing problem is quite difficult enough in this country, without having a few million homeless spooks to add to the congestion!"

Hetty Cardwell's face was very serious as she made a little gesture of remonstrance.

"I am not unduly superstitious, but I do not care to jest on such a subject," she answered gravely. "To my mind there are no more beautiful and comforting words in our language than those which ask, 'Eternal rest give unto them, O Lord——' "

She broke off abruptly, the long golden lashes which framed her eyes like the rays of a star widening in dismay as she saw the effect of her words on the Hungarian airman. The man seemed to crumple and shrink into his chair as one recoils from a physical blow; his livid features were writhing in a grimace all the more ghastly because of his obvious efforts to control them; a terrible, nameless expression flamed in his staring eyes. She started to her feet with a little cry of compassion.

"You are ill, Count von Felhagen——"

He shook his head almost fiercely.

"No. A little faint, that's all." He passed his shaking hand across his glistening forehead. "Yes—a little faint."

"No wonder!" cried his host. "You said you were famished, yet you've scarcely eaten a thing. Come, my dear Count, a glass of wine—or brandy——"

"I thank you, but no." Count Fedor rose unsteadily to his feet. "I crave for none of those things. With your permission I will retire to the room you have so kindly placed at my disposal. I am unfortunately subject to these attacks of—of faintness. But I shall be better soon—yes, very soon. In the morning I hope to have regained my usual strength. Permit me to bid you all good-night."

His restless eyes swept the room as he inclined his head in a ceremonious bow, and Hetty was conscious of a sudden chill of unreasoning foreboding as for an instant her eyes met his direct gaze. The next moment he turned and, with stiff

and curiously mechanical steps, slowly quitted the room.

As the door closed behind him, a faint, long-drawn sound swelled in the distance, rising and falling, and at last dying with a mournful cadence into silence. The Honorable Eric's eyeglass clattered into his plate as his brows shot upward in surprize.

"Merciful Moses!" he gasped. "What a horrible noise!"

"What can it be?" Norma Fane whispered as the distant wail rose again.

"It's the dogs, sir," Soames, the old butler, informed his master in a husky whisper as he bent over his chair. "They've been restless the whole of the evening. They seem afeared of something—the men down at the kennels can't pacify 'em nohow. The noise of that there hairy-plane must have sent them near crazy, sir."

Rod Merton looked up quickly.

"They were all right before the plane arrived?"

Soames nodded. "So the grooms inform me, sir. The dogs have never carried on like that before, leastways"—the old man hesitated and sank his voice—"not since the night before the last Lord Chelhurst was buried from here, sir."

The Honorable Eric frowned.

"That's just dam' silly supersition," he said loftily. "Go and find out what's the matter with them."

"I know what's the matter with 'em." A sullen look came into the butler's lined features as he muttered the words. "They scent death in the air."

"Don't be a fool!" said Brander sharply. "Let the brutes loose and see if that quiets them."

"Or lock them in the cellars," suggested Eric Chalmers. "We can't have that beastly row going on all night—any one would think we had a corpse in the house!"

"Very good, sir." Soames departed on his errand, and a few minutes later Rod Merton quietly followed him.

As the young American emerged from the door leading into the old stable yard, one of the servants came out of the kennel-shed, with a large mastiff on a leash. The dog was strangely excited and seemed reluctant to leave its usual quarters. Almost in the center of the yard it came to a halt and drew back on its haunches, throwing up its muzzle and sending forth a long, mournful howl. Drawing nearer, Rod saw that its large, expressive eyes were fixed on the illuminated window of the guest-room. Following the direction of the hound's unwavering gaze, Rod saw the shadowy outline of the count's tall figure pass across the blind.

"I wonder——" he muttered softly. Then, turning swiftly, he crossed the yard and entered the large, disused coach-house in which the airplane had been placed for the night.

Climbing into the fuselage, he looked at the indicator-level of the fuel tanks. The lines about his mouth hardened as he saw that the tanks were still half full. Count Fedor had lied when he said that shortage of petrol had forced him to descend. Then why had he made that excuse? Why had he risked a night-landing on strange ground when it was not really necessary? Why had he told the improbable story of the twin brother bearing the same name? Why had he, though declaring that he was half famished, deliberately refrained from taking food? Why had he so cunningly contrived that he should spend the night beneath the roof of Chelhurst Grange?

The questions were still hammering at Rod Merton's brain as he retraced his

steps and entered the house. And in his heart was the steadily growing conviction that the arrival of the plane was not due to a chance accident of fate, but to an elaborate and sinister plan on the part of Count Fedor von Felhagen. And he was not less certain that in some inscrutable manner that plan meant peril to Hetty Cardwell, the girl he loved.

5

THE household at Chelhurst Grange kept early hours, and as Rod Merton entered the stone-flagged hall he encountered the butler going his rounds in the process of locking up for the night.

"I shall not be turning in yet awhile, Soames," he said to the old man. "You need not switch off the lights in the library; I shall be working there for an hour or so."

"Indeed, sir?" The servant looked at him curiously. "Then you won't be lonesome, for Father Fabian was there when I passed through just now, with his nose buried in a book nearly as big as himself. One of the old 'uns with the colored pitchers, sir."

Merton nodded. He knew that the old man referred to the ancient illuminated manuscript-books, of which the library of Chelhurst Grange contained a large and valuable collection. They had had been handed down from generation to generation of the noble family that formerly owned the grange, and now it was rare indeed to find any of the unwieldy volumes taken from the locked glass cases in which they usually reposed. The secretary could not help feeling some surprize that another had taken it into his head to examine them at the very moment he intended to do the same thing.

"All right, Soames. I'll lock up carefully when I'm through. You need not wait up."

"Thank you, sir. Good-night."

The library was a large, lofty room, one of the least modernized in the whole house. Situated in the south wing, it was well lighted by the two large oriel windows during the hours of daylight; but as Merton now saw it, lit only by the dying glow of the embers on the hearth and the dimly reflected light of the single shaded reading-lamp, the place seemed haunted with a forbidding gloom. Great dusky tongues of shadow crawled on the sad-colored, faded tapestry and hung in opaque masses in the angles of the book-lined walls as if drawing back in affright from the pool of brilliant light which bathed the head and shoulders of the solitary figure who sat bent over a huge leather-bound tome.

"Good evening, Father Fabian," Rod advanced into the room as he spoke. "You seem to be well on the way to burning the midnight oil—or rather current. And it doesn't seem to be any very light literature that's keeping you from your bed," he added with a humorous glance at the formidable proportions of the ancient volume.

The priest looked up with a smile at the sound of the voice. He was old and very frail; his thin, ascetic features were deeply lined and his blue-veined hands betrayed the tremulous weakness of extreme age as he slowly removed his reading-glasses from his shrewd yet kindly eyes. His tall figure was attired in a long black cassock; a small round skull-cap crowned his somewhat untidy mass of silvery white hair.

In view of the fact that the new owner of Chelhurst Grange had never made any pretension to being a pious, or even a normally religious man, and had certainly not shown the slightest leaning to the Roman Catholic faith, the presence of Father Fabian in his household was likely

to occasion some surprize to strangers. The explanation, however, was simple enough. After Brander Cardwell had set his heart on acquiring the property, his lawyers had discovered a curious clause in the will of the last Lord Chelhurst wherein he stipulated that in the event of the grange passing into other hands, the aged priest, last of a long succession of chaplains who had served the private oratory of Chelhurst Grange, should be allowed to stay on for the few remaining years of his lifetime. Brander had been compelled to take Father Fabian "with the fixtures," as he pithily termed it; but, to his credit, the materialistic millionaire had never by word or action betrayed that he resented his obligation. On the contrary, he had increased the former somewhat meager stipend to a degree which brought tears of protesting gratitude to the old priest's eyes. In the end it was the poor and needy of the neighboring village who mainly benefited by Brander's generosity, and the donor was shrewd enough to recognize the fact. Though more than skeptical that his expenditure would ensure bliss in the problematical world to come, he had no doubt that it brought him a certain degree of popularity in this mundane sphere. So, taken on the whole, Brander was satisfied that the credit and debit sides of that particular item were about evenly balanced.

"You are right, Mr. Merton." A whimsical smile deepend the lines of the old priest's features as he made answer. "This certainly is not a modern best-seller, though it is not entirely undeserving of the name of thriller. It is *Dissertatio de Vampyris,* written by a certain Venerable Gustav Gogh, Bishop of Prague, somewhere about the year 1550."

"I know," nodded the secretary. "I came here tonight solely for the purpose of consulting that book."

The eyes of the two men met across the ivory-yellow parchment pages, each striving to read in the other's the answer to the question which he scarcely dared to put into words. It was the priest who spoke first.

"You, too?" His whisper was no louder than a long-drawn breath. "You suspect that this stranger is . . . not as other men?"

Rod Merton shrugged with a somewhat shamefaced air.

"A few hours ago I should have thought myself crazy if I had taken your question seriously, Father Fabian. But now I'm not so sure. I should like to refresh my memory by reading a certain passage from that book before I answer your question."

"You are able to translate mediæval Latin?" the priest asked in surprize.

"There is no need," replied the secretary. "One of my predecessors, who evidently had a lot of time on his hands, has made translations of every book in the library."

He stooped to one of the oak presses beneath the book-shelves, took out a thin, marble-covered exercise-book, twirled the pages rapidly, and laid it open on the desk.

"Here is the passage," he said, pointing.

FATHER FABIAN adjusted his spectacles and read aloud:

"It is not meet that I should soil this fair vellum with a particular recital of the vile misdeeds of Ulrich, the third Graf von Felhagen. Those unfortunates who lived under his iron and merciless rule were brought to such dire straits of misery and despair that they were constrained to cry aloud that God had forgotten their unhappy land, leaving them to be the sport of men who were devils in

human form. Schloss Felhagen, the count's feudal stronghold, perched proudly on an impregnable spur of the Southern Carpathians, was filled with men who lusted only to plunder, to harry, and to slay. They rode from its gates with laughter and fair music, like those who fare to a merry feast; they returned at nightfall leaving behind them a trail naked and bleeding, and lit withal by the flames of burning homesteads. But the Great Judge was but biding His hour of judgment; the cup of Count Ulrich von Felhagen's iniquity was not yet full."

"It seems pretty clear that this Ulrich was an ancestor of the man who arrived here tonight," Merton remarked as the other paused.

"Undoubtedly that is so," the priest agreed, and resumed his reading:

"About four leagues from the castle was a deep and dangerous ford across the Aluta, which is a tributary of the Danube. In a cave among the rocks of the south bank an aged hermit had made his home, serving God daily and expiating his sins by guiding across the swift-running stream such travellers as wished to reach Hermannstadt, a prosperous but unfortified town, a league and a half distant on the further bank. One day in early spring, when the first thaw of the mountain snows had swollen the river beyond its wonted height, Count Ulrich came to the ford, riding at the head of a war-like train of archers, spearmen, and steel-clad robber-knights.

" 'Ho there, Sir Hermit!' quoth the count as he reined in his horse before the door of the lonely cell. Bestir thyself, and guide us across, that we may straightway rouse the hunt on yonder bank.'

"The hermit shaded his dim eyes with his hand and gazed long and searchingly at the resplendent figure of his feudal lord. 'Methinks you go to strange hunting, Count Ulrich, armed cap-à-pié, with arbalest and mangonel, and war-arrows in your archers' sheaves. Perchance you seek your quarry in the streets of Hermannstadt?'

" 'Perchance I do,' Ulrich shrugged with haughty disdain. 'What's that to thee, thou mangy water-rat? Lead the way —or die!'

"The bright blade flashed in Ulrich's hand as he threw himself from the saddle.

" 'Mercy, great Duke,' begged the hermit, falling on his knees in supplication. 'Mercy—not for myself, for I am old and already the grave beckons me to rest. The mercy I crave is for those in yonder town—the wives, the mothers, the children, the little babes who smile in their sleep or peek shyly up at their newfound world. Spare these, great lord, spare these! Turn back the way you came, and so earn that greater mercy which otherwise thou shalt one day ask in vain. For there is a ghostly archer who laughs at plate of proof, one whose dart will find thee through thy barred gates and unbreached walls. Great as thou art, Count Ulrich, one day thou must die——'

" 'Hell's blight upon thy tongue!' Count Ulrich's sword again flashed in the sunlight; then its brightness became dimmed with red. The hermit sank groundward, his life's blood staining his tattered robe. For a space he lay all quiet save for heavy, gasping breaths. Then slowly he lifted his death-dewed face and gazed on his destroyer, eye to eye.

" 'Harken!' he cried in a voice which rang out like that of an inspired prophet. 'In a vision I have seen the Cup of thy Transgressions, and it is brimmed with blood until it overflows. Thine insensate crimes have wearied God and man; the hour of thy punishment draws nigh, and

it shall be such as to make hardened sinners tremble when they learn thy fate. Thou hast lived thy life in blood—thy race shall live on blood for evermore, in life and beyond the grave. Mark well my words as with my dying breath I set this dread curse upon the House of Felhagen. Even as thou hast shed torrents of thy subjects' blood during thy one evil life, so shall the sons of thy house glut their appetite after death. Each of thy descendants who dies unrepentant and unshriven, with his hands stained with innocent blood, shall become a foul, repulsive vampire! The peace of God shall be withheld from him. Dying, he shall still be one of the accursed Undead who find repose neither in heaven nor in earth. The grave shall reject him; in the tomb he shall not hide himself. He shall go forth into the world like a ravening beast, preying on mankind, until mankind, showing compassion to the offspring of a race which knew none, shall release him from his awful bondage. Then shall the curse be lifted; then shall the long-desired peace of the grave descend upon his tortured soul. But not till then!'

"The proud Count started forward, wild words of entreaty on his lips. But the hermit was dead."

THERE was a short pause of silence as Father Fabian came to the end of the grim chronicle. Then Rod Merton started to his feet.

"I see it all now," he exclaimed. "The curse of his race has fallen on Count Fedor."

"But why should it?" asked the priest.

"Don't you understand? Women and children were killed in the raid from which he was returning when his plane crashed. He *died with innocent blood on his hands*—died before he could make his peace with heaven. Count Fedor von Felhagen is a vampire!"

The priest lay back in his chair, his frail form shaken by silent thunderblasts of horror.

"Merciful heaven!" he gasped. "He has come here thirsting for vengeance on you—the man who killed him——"

"He thirsts for something more terrible than vengeance!" cried the other. "He has gained entry into this house like a fierce, famished beast, seeking——"

A shrill scream cut through his words; a wild note of inarticulate terror which throbbed and echoed through the empty corridors of the great house and died into a silence loaded with nameless possibilities.

Father Fabian turned a haggard face to Rod. "It came from above—from the west wing, where Hetty——"

But the young American was already at the door. Wrenching it open, he dashed into the hall and up the wide staircase, and as he ran he fumbled at his hip and drew out something which reflected the glint of plated metal as he passed the moonlit window at the head of the stairs. He had called himself a fool when he had thrust that weapon into his pocket earlier in the evening, but now he was conscious of a fierce joy as he gripped the butt and thumbed the safety-catch forward for immediate action.

The corridor was in darkness, but the moonlight slanted through the mullioned windows, splashing the polished floor with pools of diapered silver and casting ghostly reflections on the trophies of ancient arms and armor which decorated the panelled walls. The door of the guest-chamber stood ajar, but Rod did not pause to glance inside. His eyes were fixed on the farther end of the corridor, where stood the door leading into the room usually occupied by Hetty Card-

well. He breathed a prayer of thankfulness as the door yielded to his touch. Thrusting it wide without ceremony, Rod Merton entered.

The heavy curtains had been drawn across the windows, but a shaded lamp glowed dimly near the head of the bed. By its light he saw the girl lying with her glorious hair tumbled wildly across the pillow, one hand outflung as if to ward off the apparition which had brought merciful unconsciousness after her first terrified cry; and .by its dim light he sensed rather than actually saw the ominous black shape poised above her like some great bird about to descend on its prey.

Rod paused in the doorway, his right hand holding the revolver, his left sweeping the wall. His groping fingers found the switch and the next instant the room was flooded with light.

COUNT FEDOR straightened up with a jerk and swung round, his eyes glittering with a greenish lambent fire. He was dressed in his black leather flying-kit, and the tight-fitting helmet gave him the aspect of a malignant gnome.

"Throw 'em up!" Rod ordered crisply, taking steady aim at the grinning face. "I'm taking no chances, Count Fedor. I know you for what you are. I know the race from which you sprang; I know its secret—and I know its doom!"

Fedor von Felhagen threw back his head and laughed.

"Fire!" he mocked. "Do your worst! Do you think that I would be enduring this living death if mortal weapons could bring release? You know part of my secret, so know this, too: never was there one more ready to yield his life than I, and never was there one more proof against death by the hands of men!"

There was no arrogance in the vampire's manner now. Through his words echoed the accents of blank, hopeless despair. The steady muzzle of Merton's weapon wavered and then dropped. He came a pace nearer.

"You would welcome death?" he asked curiously.

"Welcome it?" The pallid features writhed like those of a tortured fiend. "Need you ask that? Never did an unhappy wretch stretched on the rack in the ancient dungeons of Felhagen Castle long for blessed oblivion more earnestly than I. But such release is not for me. I must follow my dread destiny to the end, leaving death and desolation in my trail. As a man I shudder at the evil that I do; as a vampire I gloat in foul anticipation over the unhallowed meal that is to come."

"But the legend spoke of release," cried his horrified hearer. "There must be a way?"

Count Fedor nodded somberly.

"There is," he answered in an agonized voice, "but I am forbidden to tell it to mortal ears. You pity me now, but soon your pity will be turned to loathing, for it is my doom to reap only the fairest flowers of the daughters of men. Stand aside, Captain Merton, if you love your life!"

With a light, sinuous swoop that was like the fluttering of a great bird of prey, Fedor gained the side of the bed and lifted the unconscious girl in his arms. As he faced about, Rod raised his automatic.

"Stand!" he cried.

A wild laugh was the only reply as the vampire made toward the door. Aiming coolly so as to avoid hitting the precious burden in the count's arms, Rod pressed the trigger. The crash of the discharge was answered by the tinkle of falling glass as the bullet shattered the window-

pane immediately behind the vampire's head. Shot after shot leapt from the flaming muzzle as Merton held the trigger back, and mingling with the reports came unearthly peals of mocking laughter as the count, unscathed by the hail of lead, thrust him aside with superhuman strength and approached the open door.

"Not so easy to stop me this time, eh?" came from his sneering, livid lips. "You waste your ammunition on the empty air. Nothing can stop me now, and in a few minutes I will be in my plane, heading for——"

He broke off with a cry of shuddering terror and shrank back, his burden slipping to the floor as he raised his hands to shield his staring eyeballs from the sight which confronted him.

Father Fabian stood in the open doorway, and in his upraised hand he held the symbol of his faith.

The priest slowly advanced into the room, and step by step Count Fedor retreated backward before him, until he was crouching against the farther wall.

"Put up your weapon," the priest addressed Merton quietly, but without turning his head. "Carry that poor child into another room. Happily she does not know the peril through which she has passed. She must never know."

Rod stopped mechanically and lifted Hetty's unconscious form. He took a few steps, then hesitated.

"But I can not leave you here—with that——" he began to protest; but Father Fabian shook his silvery head.

"Fear not for me, my son. The powers of evil are as so many idle winds, wasting their fury against the imperishable rock on which I stand. Leave me alone with this unhappy man. Go, not in fear but in rejoicing; for this night shall an uneasy spirit be released from bondage."

Glancing at the vampire's face, Merton marvelled at the change that had come over it. The bloodless features were calm and composed; the light of returning hope shone tranquilly in the tortured eyes.

Raising his hand and solemnly making the sign of a cross in the air, the old priest began to declaim in measured accents:

"Misereatur vestri omnipotens Deus, et dismissis peccatis vestris, perducat vos ad vitam æternam. Libera nos, quæsumus Domine, ab omnibus malis . . ."

The sonorous Latin of the ancient invocation was still ringing through the room as Rod Merton passed through the door and gently closed it behind him. It took him some little time to carry the still senseless girl into one of the bedrooms on the upper floor and hand her over to the maids who had been aroused by the shots. When he again descended he found Father Fabian kneeling in the room, alone. But, far away in the direction of the English Channel, the deep thrumming note of a plane in full flight was gradually growing fainter.

The priest slowly rose to his feet and looked long and earnestly into the young man's face.

"Yes, the end draws nigh," he said, answering the unspoken question that he read there. "Count Fedor von Felhagen has set forth on his last lone flight. Soon, very soon, his troubled soul shall know that peace which passeth understanding."

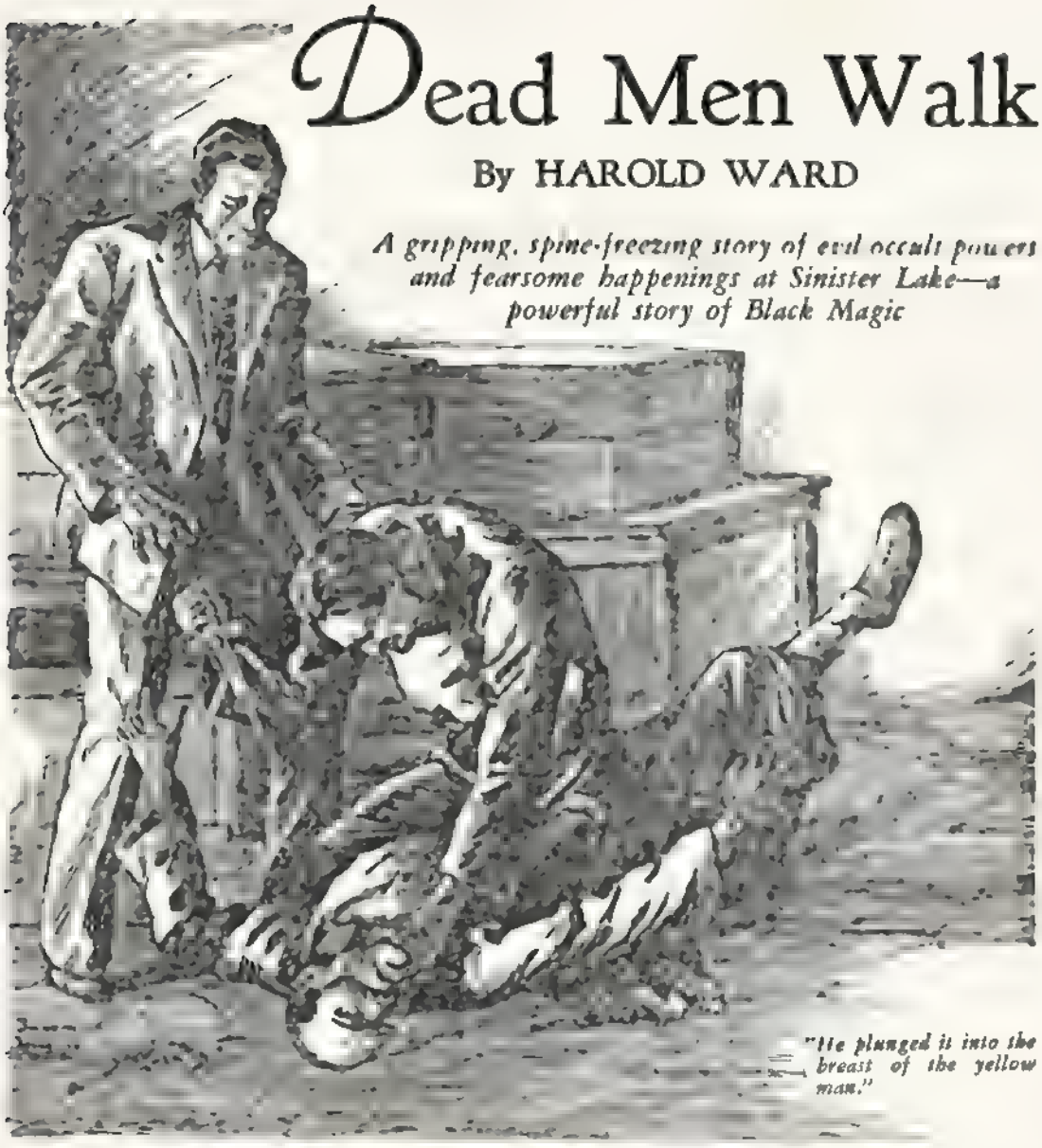
Even as he spoke the distant humming ceased, and Merton, looking from the window, saw the dark outline of the vampire plane glide downward and plunge beneath the surface of the moonlit sea like a weary, broad-pinioned bird seeking rest.

W. T.—S

Dead Men Walk

By HAROLD WARD

A gripping, spine-freezing story of evil occult powers and fearsome happenings at Sinister Lake—a powerful story of Black Magic



"He plunged it into the breast of the yellow man."

1. Black Magic

"I AM at Sinister Lake," the letter read. "From a distance—for the grounds are patrolled both night and day—I have witnessed through my field-glasses many strange and unbelievable things. I have seen corpses—men who from their appearance have been dead for many days—walking in a weed-grown garden filled with loathsome reptiles and poisonous plants. Rumor has it that this old dark house—once a tumble-down monastery on the edge of the lake—has a room which is entirely filled with the bodies of men and women filched from near-by cemeteries and that in this room hellish revelries are held in the darkness of the night.

"I feel certain that this place is the source of that for which we have been searching. But, chief, it is so weird, so horrible, so unbelievable that I can hardly bring myself to a realization of the truth. Can the dead walk? No, you

W. T.—"

will say. Yet I have seen them. And, too, I have seen Deucaleus—rumor has it that he is a sorcerer and a priest of the devil—from a distance, also. He is a cold, cunning, cruel man, as venomous, I believe, as the snakes in his garden and a thousand times more dangerous. He has a servant, Ah Foon, a pock-marked Chinaman with a death's head for a face and a skeleton-like body. I have resolved to take the bull by the horns and tonight I will learn the truth of these strange tales——"

I STOPPED the reader with a gesture, my face betrayed the anger I felt.

"Did you bring me half-way across the continent to listen to the insane ravings of an out-patient of Bedlam?" I demanded.

David Burnham, chief of the United States Secret Service, looked up with a tired smile.

"It does sound like nonsense, doesn't it?" he answered calmly. "Yet, Blake, that which I have read to you is the report of one of the best operatives I have ever had the good fortune to command—a man absolutely fearless and strictly on the square. None other, in fact, than your old partner and co-worker, Jerry Lyons."

"Jerry Lyons?" I exclaimed. "Jerry Lyons gibbering of walking dead men and priests of the devil? Jerry Lyons writing of rooms filled with cadavers and——"

Burnham shrugged his broad shoulders.

"It does sound far-fetched, I'll admit," he said again. "Yet Jerry Lyons has proved the truth of his deductions—proved it with his life. For Jerry, my boy, has joined the ranks of the living dead. Now do you understand why I sent for you instead of assigning some one closer to the scene of operations?"

I nodded. My eyes were filled with tears—tears of which I was not ashamed. Jerry Lyons dead? Jerry Lyons, my pal, my comrade, my friend. The chief and his assistant sat in silence until my grief had burned itself out.

Finally I pulled myself together.

"Tell me about it, please," I snapped. "Then assign me to carry on where Jerry left off. I'll get the man that killed him even though I lose my own life in the attempt."

For a moment he made no reply. Then:

"Have you ever dabbled in the occult?" he asked. "No? Well, I have been reading up on the subject. You've heard, no doubt, of Black Magic?" Then, as I looked at him inquiringly: "Oh, I don't blame you for wondering whether the heads of the United States Secret Service are going crazy, talking, as we are, of magical practises and mysteries, Black Masses and Black Magic. Sometimes I wonder myself whether the whole thing isn't a freak of my imagination. And yet——"

He leaned forward, his keen eyes glittering, his voice tense and earnest.

"And yet," he went on, "literature teems with tales of necromancy and witchcraft, of sorcery and pacts with the devil. We of this hurly-burly age have long since ceased to believe in such things. Yet do we actually know that they have no existence? Our forefathers believed in them implicitly and were constantly guarding against them. A million methods have been devised to exorcise the powers of evil."

Again he stopped, his voice dropping to a husky whisper.

"Metempsychosis—the transmigration of the soul after death into the body of another—has long been the secret ambition of every man in the medical fra-

ternity and many of the priesthood as well. What certainty have we, Blake, that some one has not succeeded after all these years—that somewhere lives a man with power to raise the dead?

"We know that there is a religious sect who call themselves Satanists. We know that they still hold Sabbats, or witch's conventions, in practically all of the larger cities, although the police have never been able to trace them to their source. We know that they practise the Black Mass and all of the other hellish things that go with it and that the headquarters of the damned outfit is somewhere in China or Mongolia. So long as they remained within the law there was no necessity for the government to interfere. But now——"

FOR a long time he sat there as if collecting his thoughts. Finally he went on.

"A few weeks ago a flood of new bills suddenly appeared throughout the country—splendid counterfeits—tens, twenties, fifties—all excellent-appearing stuff hardly to be distinguished from the genuine. The engraving and printing equal anything the government puts out. Only the paper is inferior.

"I assigned Jerry to the job of running it to its source. A month ago his last report, a portion of which I have just read to you, came in. Then he ceased writing. I sent Kilroy up to Sinister Lake after ten days had elapsed and there was still no word from Jerry. Kilroy, too, has not returned."

For an instant he fumbled among the papers with which his desk was littered. Then he continued.

"Day before yesterday a man was arrested by the Chicago police for shoving the queer. The detective bureau of that city immediately wired us his description, Bertillon measurements, fingerprints, etc. And, Blake, there is not a doubt in the world. The man who was arrested was —Jerry Lyons!"

"Never!" I exclaimed, half rising from my chair. "You don't realize what you are saying, chief. Jerry Lyons is square and you know it."

"Wait," he interrupted, holding up a restraining hand. "Hear me out, Blake. Cameron, our Chicago agent in charge, was out of town for the day. When I finally got him on the 'phone and told him to go down to the station it was midnight. I wanted him to go in person because, as you well remember, he worked with you and Jerry on the Lombard case and knows Lyons as well as he knows himself.

"I might say that from the time the prisoner was arrested he absolutely refused to utter a word. In his report, telephoned to me, Cameron says that he acted like a man in a trance or under the influence of some powerful narcotic. As a result, the Chicago police left him alone until Cameron's arrival, thinking that he would sleep off the stuff that was holding him in its power. But when Cameron arrived he found that the prisoner was dead. His body was cold, and *rigor mortis* had set in.

"And, Blake, Cameron swears that a medical examination shows that he had been dead for days—possibly weeks!"

I looked at the old man, thinking that he was attempting a grim jest, but he was in deadly earnest.

"Oh, it was Jerry all right," he went on. "Cameron identified him, even to the little scar on his left thumb caused by the cut he got the time you two arrested Dago Murphy and he tried to stick a knife into you. Jerry saved your life and got wounded in the hand. Remember?

There's no question about the identification, Blake."

My head dropped to my breast.

"Jerry Lyons gone wrong? Jerry Lyons betraying the service?" I whispered the words half to myself. Then, "But, God, chief! You don't—you can not—understand what this means to me. Jerry and I were more than pals—we were like brothers. And now you say that he turned crook before he was blotted out——"

"I didn't say that he went crooked," Burnham interposed. "I was trying to intimate that some one—some one possessed of the devil's own power—some one who has caused the dead to walk—used Jerry for his own sinister purpose. And there have been others, Blake, others besides Jerry. God, but it's hellish! And we don't know how to contend with the accursed thing."

He leaped to his feet and paced the floor nervously. Finally he pulled himself together and dropped into his chair again.

"Last week three men were arrested for shoving the queer in as many different cities," he resumed. "Philadelphia, Boston and Peoria, Illinois. In all three instances they were found dead in their cells next morning."

"A gigantic counterfeiting ring working in collusion with the police officials," I remarked.

The old man shook his head negatively.

"Nothing would please me better than to think so," he answered grimly. "But hear me out, Blake. Naturally we investigated. And the investigation shows—and here comes the unbelievable part of the story—that the dead men had all died before. By that I mean that the body found in the cell the morning after the arrest was always that of some one who had died some time previous. When they were identified, we had the graves opened and found the bodies gone. Naturally, we've kept the thing out of the papers, but it's the truth just the same."

I looked at him questioningly.

"I don't mean to doubt your word, chief," I said quickly. "But I can't—well, I just can't believe it."

John Anning, the assistant chief, who had been a patient listener, leaped to his feet, his thin, esthetic face grim and pale.

"Keep out of the case, Blake!" he almost shouted. "I like you too well to see you go to your death as Lyons and Kilroy have done. You don't understand it. Neither does the chief. But I have studied the damnable thing. I've gone into it from every detail. Let it run its course, both of you. Eventually this thing—call it what you will—will return to the place whence it came. Until then no human power can prevail against it."

He was an earnest man, was John Anning. A student, an analyst, he had that which few of us in the service possess—piety and religion. It was currently reported that he had once studied for holy orders; so that now his readiness to believe the weird tale the chief had told me was far from understandable.

"You both know that I'm not superstitious," he went on. "Burnham and I have argued the thing for two days, Blake. I've begged him not to send any more men to their death. I understand theology—Black Magic—a lot of things that the ordinary layman does not know. And I am as certain as I am that I am in this room, that whoever it is that is pulling this trick is possessed."

"Meaning——?"

"That the devil has come up out of hell and taken possession of the body of some poor creature and is using it to further his own hellish plans. Oh, it might be you, or I, or any of us. The devil plays no favorites. Luckily it isn't. But can

we—mere humans—fight the devil? No. Again I say, refuse to carry on. Quit the service if you must, but keep out of the whole hellish affair."

Burnham ran his fingers through his mop of hair until it stood awry in a thousand different directions. Suddenly he arose and, standing with his hands resting on the edge of his desk, he leaned forward until his rough-hewn face was within a foot of my own.

"I half believe that Anning is right in his deductions," he said hoarsely. "And I don't want to attach any blame to you if you refuse to take the assignment. But devil or no devil, possession or no possession, I'm going to lay low the man who killed Jerry Lyons if it takes every man in the service, including myself.

"Jerry Lyons was murdered!" he went on. "There wasn't a mark on his clothes to show how he had met death. But when they stripped him they found a bullet hole in his chest. He had been shot squarely in the heart.

"In plain words, Jerry Lyons was killed and then resurrected. Attired in a different suit of clothes, he was sent to do the bidding of this master criminal—this man who, Anning says, is possessed of a devil. His work accomplished, the strange power over him was withdrawn.

"Until this menace is removed from the earth, civilization will not be safe. Think of it, boy—think of it! A man with power to raise the dead; only this man uses the bodies for his own hellish purposes. He has only started. Who can say where his lust for power will lead him?"

I got up, my face showing the emotion under which I was laboring.

"I care not a fig for the rest of the world!" I snapped. "It's Jerry Lyons I'm thinking of—Jerry, the best pal a man ever had. The squarest guy that ever wore the shield of the service. A man who would rather die than do a crooked deed. I'll get the man who committed this crime, chief—I'll get him for Jerry's sake."

"That's why I sent for you—took you off from the other job against Anning's wishes," Burnham said proudly. "I knew that you would take the assignment. I've got to put some one on the case and I want it to be some one who knew Jerry and loved him. You are the best man for the job. I'm sending you to your death, perhaps. But, as I said before, the devilish thing must be stamped out, if it takes every man in the service. Prison bars will not avail. You can not imprison thought. This man—this Deucaleus, as Jerry called him—must die."

"Leave him to me," I said grimly.

"Deucaleus," Anning interposed. "Deucaleus, one of the trinity of infernal spirits mentioned in ancient lore—Lucifer, Deucaleus and Satan—into whose hands the magi of old committed the spirits of those they wished to punish. Better take my advice, Blake, and refuse the assignment. You can't fight the devil——"

"Even though they are all three rolled into one, I'll get him," I snarled.

Burnham nodded, a look of happiness in his tired eyes.

"Then you——"

"I volunteer."

2. The Dead Lives Again

FOR a long time we sat in silence, as men are prone to do when wrestling with a weighty problem, each of us busy with his own thoughts. It was the chief who spoke first.

"I presume that you will start where Jerry left off?"

I nodded.

"At Sinister Lake," I responded. "And with your permission, chief, I will commence work immediately."

Anning shrugged his shoulders.

"You're a fool," he said quickly. "It means your death, boy. I'm fey—I have hunches. This is one of them."

"This is a matter in which you have free rein," Burnham said quietly. "I'm not the one to ask a man to volunteer—practically to attend to his own funeral—and then try to give him instructions. Use your own judgment."

I got up, ready to take my leave, when the sudden jangle of the telephone broke into the conversation. Burnham held up a restraining hand as he drew the instrument closer to him.

"Wait a minute," he commanded, picking the receiver off from the hook. For an instant he listened in silence. Yet the expression creeping across his weather-beaten face told us that he was hearing news of importance. Finally he banged up the receiver and turned to us with a smile.

"The Lord is with us," he exclaimed. "That was Carthage, cashier of the First Trust and Central. Their house detective, Vickers—used to be with us, remember, until he retired—has just arrested Flash Peters. He was changing small bills for a big one—good ones—fives and tens—but Vickers pinched him on suspicion. When they searched him they found his pockets lined with the queer that we've been talking about. So, instead of turning him in to the regular police, Vickers is holding him for us."

"What a break!" I exclaimed as my two companions reached for their hats. "We may get a lead that will take us somewhere."

We started toward the door when I stopped suddenly, a look of consternation creeping over my face in spite of myself.

"Did you say Flash Peters?" I demanded.

Burnham nodded.

"Yeah; the fellow you and Jerry arrested in the Housenga case," he answered. "Why?"

"Because," I said slowly, hesitating for want of words with which to express myself, "Flash Peters died two weeks ago. It's not generally known, but it's a fact, nevertheless."

David Burnham's face aged ten years in as many seconds. He leaned against the desk for support, and for an instant I thought that he was going to pitch forward upon his face.

"The same thing over again," he said slowly, half to himself. "But, notwithstanding, it gives us the break that we've been looking for. With Peters still at the bank and not yet in the custody of the police, we will put a guard over him and keep a watch on him night and day."

The three of us raced for the elevator side by side. Burnham's car was waiting at the curb. A moment later we were picking our way through the congestion of traffic toward the world's greatest financial center.

Leaning back against the cushions, his eyes half closed, the old man listened while I told of how a clue on the case I was interested in had accidentally led to Flash Peters. At the door of the Peters' home—for Flash, when not carrying on his counterfeiting activities, led a strictly domestic life in a peaceful suburban bungalow—I had noted the wreath upon the door. Inquiry had brought forth the fact that the man I sought had departed this life only the day before as a result of a heart attack. I had even entered the house and gazed down upon his cold, dead face.

It was not until I had completed my story that Burnham bestirred himself.

"It's beyond me," he growled. "Far, far beyond me. Maybe you or Anning can figure it out. I'm damned if I can."

The assistant chief spat like an angry cat.

"It's the devil, I tell you," he roared. "The devil in possession of some poor creature's body. We'll get nowhere until he sees fit to pull in his horns and take himself back to the hell from whence he came."

Burnham grunted, but made no reply.

GEORGE CARTHAGE, cashier of the First Trust and Central, sat at his big, flat-topped desk. Close to him, yet so located as to be between the third figure in the room and the door, was Patrick Vickers, late of the United States Secret Service and now bank detective. He and Carthage looked up as we entered, and Vickers indicated with a quick nod of his head the man slumped down in a chair across the desk from the cashier.

We halted just inside the door. Then, as Burnham closed it behind us, we moved forward in order to obtain a closer view of the prisoner. Tall, smooth-shaven, neatly attired, his wavy black hair slightly tinged with gray, Flash Peters had little of the appearance of the rogue. Yet there could be no mistake. The man who sprawled listlessly in the big, leather-stuffed chair was Flash Peters. But Flash Peters was dead. I had seen him in his coffin with my own eyes.

Strolling forward as nonchalantly as possible under the circumstances, my eyes never leaving his face, I extended my hand.

"How are you, Flash?" I asked. "When did you come back from the tomb?"

He made no reply. His eyes stared straight ahead. They were dull, glassy—the eyes of a man under the influence of some powerful drug. They were lifeless.

I took him by the shoulder as if to shake him. In doing so my fingers touched the flesh of his neck just above the collar. I took a step backward with an exclamation of horror.

The flesh was that of a dead man. It was cold—as cold as the grave itself.

The others were watching me. I turned to Vickers.

"Has he made any statement?" I asked, to cover my confusion.

The bank detective shook his head.

"He has not uttered a word since he entered the bank," he answered. "I spotted him the minute he came in. He walked up to one of the assistant tellers like a man doped to the gills and shoved a handful of bills through the wicket with a note asking that he be given hundreds for them. The teller thought that he was deaf and dumb; but not I. I was at his elbow when he turned, and I brought him here to Mr. Carthage and searched him. He just slumped down in the chair like that and said nothing."

The roll of counterfeit money was on Carthage's desk. Burnham picked it up and inspected it, then passed it back again.

Turning to the prisoner, he asked him a number of questions. To none of them did Peters make reply, merely gazing dumbly ahead as if bored with the whole affair.

I was seized with a sudden inspiration. True, I had seen Flash in his coffin. But that proved little or nothing. Other men were known to have feigned death. And his attitude now? Might it not be that he was just recovering from the influence of some powerful drug?

Reaching across the desk for the telephone, I called the registrar of vital statistics and asked him whether he had the

death certificate of one Charles L. Peters, giving him the date as well as I could recall it. Inside of two minutes the answer came back.

"He was interred a week ago Thursday in the public mausoleum at Lakeview Cemetery," was the reply. "The certificate of death from heart disease was filled out in proper form and signed by Doctor Samuel Abelson, a physician of ability and excellent reputation."

I thumbed hastily through the telephone book and found the number of the Lakeview Cemetery office. Calling it, I was soon in conversation with the custodian.

"Milton Blake of the United States Secret Service talking," I told him. "I want some information and I want it in a hurry. A week ago Thursday a man named Charles L. Peters was laid away in one of the crypts in your institution. How soon can you ascertain whether the body is still there?"

I heard an exclamation come over the wire. Then:

"It is possible, but decidedly unusual, to open a vault without the proper papers," he answered. "Our master key unlocks any crypt in the building. But on the other hand, I——"

"To hell with the papers!" I exclaimed. "We want speed. This is a federal case, so govern yourself accordingly. Should any trouble come to you as a result of assisting me, my chief, Mr. Burnham, is here with me and will straighten the matter out. Call me back at the First Trust and Central—they will vouch for me—and ask to be connected with the office of Mr. Carthage, the cashier."

I hung up the receiver and turned to the prisoner. He had not changed position. His eyes still gazed straight ahead as if he peered into the great unknown.

THE sudden jangle of the telephone brought us to our feet. Somehow the room seemed charged with electricity; we were expectant, waiting, we knew not what. Carthage answered, then passed the instrument over to me. The excited voice of the Lakeview custodian came drifting over the wire.

"The crypt is empty!" he shouted. "The coffin was pried open and the body removed. And that's not all. He was insured for fifty thousand dollars; his wife collected it yesterday. The superintendent told me about it just now when I broke the news to him of the removal of the body."

I cut him off with a promise to run out and see him later. Turning to the others, I told them what I had learned.

"That seems to be the solution to the puzzle," I said thoughtfully. "Some gang has gotten hold of a powerful drug which puts them down and out for the time being—something which gives a man every appearance of death, but in reality only throws them into a trance. Suspended animation——"

"Jerry Lyons was shot in the heart," Burnham answered grimly. "There was no suspended animation in his case. Yet he walked. How can you explain that away?"

"I—I had almost forgotten poor Jerry," I answered. "Because the other hypothesis seemed so far-fetched, so——"

A startled cry from Carthage stopped me in the middle of the sentence.

"Look! Look!" he shouted, his face twisted with fear. He pointed dramatically at the man on the opposite side of the desk.

The face of Flash Peters was changing color. There before our eyes the skin was turning a dark, purplish blue-black. It was the color of flesh that has long

been consigned to the grave—flesh that has commenced to rot. Over it was a white mold—the mold that goes with death and decay. His jaw had dropped. His teeth, drawn back in a wolfish grin, showed white between the shriveled lips. It was ghastly—horrible.

Over the body danced an unholy light—a weird, phosphorescent glow. It semed to cover the man like a thin, transparent cloak. Then it slowly changed color—changed to a bright, bloody red.

For a moment it ran jerkily from the lower limbs to the shoulders; then, gathering itself suddenly, it seemed to assume the proportions of a human being. It towered above us like a giant—a tall, vaporish, smoke-like thing of blood. It was formless, faceless. Yet it had a face and it had a form. Its long arms writhed like snakes. They extended themselves toward us as if beckoning.

Vickers was on his knees, his rosary in his hand.

"Holy Mary, Mother of Christ!" I heard him exclaim. Then: "Hail, Mary, Mother of God. . . ."

Burnham leaped forward and, tearing the beads from the kneeling man's neck, hurled the crucifix at the red menace that towered above us.

There was a wild, shrieking wail . . . the wail of a soul in hell. . . .

The awful thing receded. The figure of the bleeding Christ lay upon the breast of the dead man. From it the bloody vapor drew away as if afraid. An instant later it was gone.

And as God is my witness, the face of Flash Peters had changed. His lips had closed and he was smiling now. It was the smile of a man who had commenced the ascent out of purgatory.

I turned to the others. Burnham stood, his arm still extended, gazing at the spot where the thing had been. Carthage was standing, his fingers gripping the edge of his desk, his eyes bulging, his face white and drawn. Vickers still knelt beside the chair. Anning had not moved. He was still gazing straight ahead, his thin face expressionless.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet and turned to me.

"God, Blake! God! Can't you see, now? Again I say to you, keep out of the infernal case. Let the devil finish his work here on earth. Then he will return to hell. Until then no human power can stop him. . . ."

3. Ah Foon

It was close to noon when I reached my destination—a tiny hamlet located on both sides of a dried-up creek which wound through a range of wooded hills and rocky crags. A fog hovered over the lowlands. From the top of the hills the place looked like a fairy picture, the spires and roofs of the buildings projecting above the white haze of the vapor. The road was not paved. My car coasted, however; as I struck the fog bank I applied the brakes and slowed up at the curve, only to find myself an instant later at the end of the main thoroughfare.

That the town had once been more populous than at the present time was apparent. Half of the buildings were empty and deserted, the windows broken, the roofs fallen in. There was not a soul in sight.

I slowly negotiated the narrow defile until I glimpsed a board sign overhanging the sidewalk on which was painted in faded letters: *"Sinister Lake House."* I drew up alongside the curb and, climbing out of the car, entered. The so-called office was as deserted as the street. Upon the table that passed for a desk was a bell; over it was a sign on which was in-

scribed the legend: *"Punch bell for clerk."* I followed instructions.

No one answered. I rang the bell again. To my right I heard a shuffling noise. Then through a door a man entered — an ancient graybeard attired in overalls and sloppy carpet slippers. He shuffled into the room and looked at me inquiringly.

"Fifty cents a day without meals; dollar a day with meals," he vouchsafed.

For a moment I hesitated.

"I will probably be in town only a short time," I responded. "I am in search of a friend of mine. He was here several weeks ago. His name is Jerry Lyons. He——"

"Guests ain't so numerous but what I can remember 'em," the old man interrupted. "I recall this chap."

He thumbed over the dog-eared register for an instant, then looked up with a sage wag of his head.

"Yep. Had room eighteen at the head of the stairs. Only here a few days. Left one night and never did come back. Sent a stranger here next morning to pay his bill and get his grip."

"This man—this stranger?" I inquired as casually as possible. "Can you tell me anything about him?"

The ancient polished his glasses speculatively. Then, adjusting them to his high-bridged nose, he peered through them at me again.

"Just why are you asking all these questions?" he demanded.

"This friend — this Mr. Lyons — suffered from dementia," I lied on the spur of the moment. "He was injured during the war. Has a wandering complex. Often leaves home and is gone for days. This is the longest he has ever been away. He has a delusion that he is a detective and is on a case. Sometimes he returns; often he does not. This is one of the times that he didn't. I am employed by his people in an effort to locate him."

The old man nodded again. Stepping cautiously from behind the battered desk, he sidled toward me.

"I didn't see the man who got the grips," he said, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. "Hank Binks, who helps me here, was on duty at the time. But he——"

His voice dropped lower and he bent his mouth a bit closer to my ear.

"Hank says that he's as certain as death and taxes that the car was from the old monastery."

"Meaning—what?" I demanded.

He hesitated again. Then he turned away with another sage shake of his head.

"I'm an old man and sometimes I talk too danged much," he whispered back. "Maybe I've said too much already. Maybe you're one of them trying to trap me."

He walked hesitatingly toward the door through which he had entered. I attempted to stop him, but in vain. Just outside he turned and peered at me again.

"If you are one of 'em, then I ain't told you a darned thing," he chuckled wheezily. "If you are not, then keep what I've already said under your hat."

He disappeared through the swinging door, leaving me alone again.

JUST across the street the word *"Post-office"* was painted on the window of a tumbledown store. Leaving my car where it was, I crossed over, waiting just inside the door until the paunchy, red-faced man in denim apron and rolled-up sleeves had completed the sale of a package of soda to a loquacious woman who seemed inclined to haggle over the price. The sale finally completed, he turned to me.

"The postmaster?" I inquired.

He grinned.

"When there's any post to be mastered," he chuckled. "I'm it because the government couldn't get nobody else to take it after Lou Rencher died. I'm a Democrat, but they shoved it onto me, anyway. It's a damned nuisance. My name's Conover. Are you one of them inspectors?"

I shook my head and, stepping closer, exhibited the leather-covered case in which were my credentials. He inspected them critically, insisting that I remove my hat that he might compare the photograph pasted on the sheet with my face. Satisfied, he handed the case back to me.

"Well, I'm danged!" he exclaimed. "All my life I've been reading about Secret Service men, but you're the first one I've ever seen. What brings you to Sinister Lake?"

Judging from his appearance that he was a man who might be trusted, I told him as much of the story as I deemed advisable, which was to the effect that Jerry Lyons had last reported from this town, but saying nothing of his death nor of the other events of the past few weeks. He listened intently until I had finished.

"So old Judd Raymer over at the hotel says that the car that called for his stuff was from the old monastery, eh?" he ruminated. "Huh. This man, Lyons — seems to me that I remember him mailing that letter. It was addressed to a box number in the city instead of to any one person. He was a tall, good-looking fellow, wasn't he? Sandy hair? Letters ain't so frequent that I can't take notice of them."

I stepped a bit closer.

"There was another—a man named Kilroy — who followed him. He, too, has not reported lately. Have you noticed him? He was short and broad-shouldered and dark."

Conover shook his head.

"Twice this morning I have heard reference made to an old monastery," I went on casually, striving hard not to betray my interest. "What sort of place is it? Where is it located?"

The postmaster hesitated just as the hotel man had done. Then his sense of duty mastering his natural caution, he decided to answer my question.

"This place takes its name from a lake located a matter of three or four miles from here," he said finally. "It's a small body of water little more than a quarter of a mile across and maybe twice that long, but because of its extreme depth the waters are black. There's a lot of trees growing right up to the shore, too. They throw the waters into a shadow. These things combined with the fact that tradition says that a party of men were drowned in it in Colonial days caused it to be named Sinister Lake. When the government changed the name of the post-office here, they named it after the lake.

"To make a long story short, years ago this used to be quite a populous village. Lot of lead mining around here. An old man named Keatley was the big gun of the lead mines. He built himself a big mansion at the upper edge of the lake—built it of native stone quarried from the hills back of the house. His wife died and he and his only son, a boy named Lemuel, lived there alone with a pack of servants. Then came the War of 1812 and Lemuel went and never came back. As a result, old man Keatley lost his mind. The lead mines went bad and he finally killed himself. The old house went to wrack and ruin. Nobody around here had money enough to buy it and put it in repair."

Again he hesitated as if for want of words.

"Folks said that it was haunted," he finally went on, his red face turning a shade more crimson. "They said that old man Keatley used to wander about the grounds on dark nights wringing his hands and crying out for his dead son and that a spectral boat containing the ghosts of the drowned men used to push in to the shore and meet him. Be that as it may, the place laid idle for years. Then some sort of monkish orders—Trappists, I think they called themselves—bought it and built an addition to it. It flourished for thirty or forty years. Then something went wrong and they abandoned it.

"It went to ruin again. The grounds grew up to weeds and underbrush. The windows dropped out and the doors fell in and vines and creepers clambered up over the broken walls. Then a year or so ago it was given out that it had been sold again—this time to a man named Deucaleus—a dark, swarthy foreigner of some kind. I've never seen him but once and that was from a distance. He brought a crew out from the city and put it in repair and moved into it one night. Nobody ever sees him. Practically everything he buys comes from the city. Sometimes they haul it out by car; sometimes it comes by freight. It is called for by a big Chinaman who works for this Deucaleus. There seems to be a lot of people up there, but they never mingle with anybody. Whenever they come or go, it is always by night and by auto and they never come to town."

He lowered his voice again.

"There's something peculiar going on up there," he whispered. "Nobody knows what it is, but there's a lot of talk; but nobody dares speak out and voice his suspicions. They've surrounded the place with a barbed-wire fence—a regular war-time entanglement — inside of which they've dug a ditch which is filled with water. The only way to get in or out is by means of a bridge which is lowered from inside the house. There are signs posted up saying that the grounds are filled with poisonous snakes; they say this man, Deucaleus, raises them for their poison. Personally, I don't know. I've got sense enough to stay away from where I'm not wanted."

He stopped suddenly, his face turning a shade paler. A car had drawn up to the curb and a man was getting out. An instant later the door opened.

The man who entered was a Chinaman. That much was apparent, despite his American attire. Tall, his beady little almond eyes were set far back in their sockets. His pock-marked skin was drawn so tightly over his high cheekbones as to give him the appearance of a walking skeleton. His cheeks were sunken, his body was thin almost to emaciation. There was something so sinister, so repellent about the man that I shuddered in spite of myself.

The part of the store where I was standing was in the shadow. For an instant he failed to notice me as he glided toward my companion, a crooked smile upon his pitted face.

"*Joe son,* Conover," he murmured in Chinese.

His glance suddenly fell upon me. He gave me a fleeting glance, then turned to the grocer again.

"I forgot that you can not understand my language," he apologized in excellent English. "I am a bit absent-minded at times. A pound of your best tea, please. We are all out over at the big house."

He waited until Conover had tied up the package. Then, depositing the money on the counter, he walked out.

4. The Cabin by the Lake

CONOVER waited until he heard the automobile pull away from the curb before he ventured another remark.

"Peculiar—doggoned peculiar," he said gravely. "That's the second time any one from the lake has ever been inside this store. Suppose that it was a coincidence, or has he heard that you are here and came to look you over?"

I shrugged my shoulders, my mind already made up.

"This lake?" I inquired. "Is there any sort of habitation thereabouts that I can rent—some place to use as a sort of headquarters? You have campers around here, I presume?"

Conover scratched his chin reflectively.

"Occasionally," he answered. "I've got an old shack just across the lake from the place I've been telling you about. Used to use it for duck-hunting until this bunch moved in. Since then I've kept away. Not that I'm scared—me, a free-born American citizen—but I—well, I just don't care about being too neighborly with 'em. You're welcome to it if you want it."

Two hours later, my dinner completed at a little restaurant in the middle of the block, I loaded my machine with blankets and supplies purchased at the postmaster's store and, waving him a good-bye, turned in the direction of the cabin on the lake.

It was nearly dark by the time I had cleaned the place out. Yet it was not as dirty as it should have been had it been unoccupied as long as Conover had stated. Then, cooking myself a makeshift supper, I lighted my pipe and leaned back in my chair to think things out.

The glint of light from my lantern struck a bit of metal hidden away in a chink in the log wall. For a moment I sat there staring at it lazily, my mind occupied with the problem on which I was engaged. Then something about its shape prompted me to get up and walk across the room for a closer look at it.

An instant later I was staring down at Jimmy Kilroy's shield.

There was no mistaking it. There was the number on it—seventy-nine—the number with which the missing operative was supposed to sign all official communications. I turned it over. His name was engraved upon the back.

In spite of what Conover had told me, Jimmy Kilroy had occupied that cabin within a few weeks. It was easy to vision what he had done. Resolved to take no chances of being identified as a Secret Service man, he had hidden the shield away between the two logs, expecting to return for it later.

Why, then, had Conover lied to me? Why had he said that he knew nothing of the second operative's appearance at Sinister Lake? Why had he said that the cabin had not been occupied for a year or more? Was he, too, mixed up in the strange goings-on at the old monastery?

The problem was growing deeper and deeper. I wanted to think it out before taking another step. Hastily extinguishing my lantern, I moved my camp chair out onto the little porch overlooking the lake and, my feet atop the rail, gazed in the direction of the huge pile of masonry across the somber waters. Not a window was lighted. It showed up against the bleak hills like some great feudal castle.

My inspection completed, I knocked the ashes from my pipe and was about to turn in for a short nap before commencing my investigation when the snapping of a twig in the rear of the cabin brought me to my feet.

For a moment I stood there listening, every faculty alert. Then, dropping to

all fours and keeping in the shadow lest I offer a target for some hidden marksman, I drew my revolver and crept around the building.

Behind the cabin was a small clearing which had grown up to weeds and brambles. Through the opening thus made the moon shone with a silvery radiance, bringing out in bold relief the figure of a man walking toward me. He was naked save for the pair of swimming-trunks about his middle. From where I crouched, I could see him plainly. His eyes, glassy and dull, stared straight ahead like those of a sleep-walker. In his hand was a small, metallic box. He held it stiffly ahead of him. In fact, every movement was stiff and ungainly. He walked with the action of a wooden soldier.

The clearing was, as I have remarked, filled with weeds and brambles. From them the thorns protruded. He made no effort to avoid them, tramping through the clumps as if they did not exist. I saw the cruel thorns tear through the flesh of his legs. And yet he did not bleed.

Sudden realization swept over me. The man was dead.

I leaped to my feet with a shout of alarm, my revolver ready for action. Had he been alive he could have seen me plainly there in the moonlight. But he made no motion to turn about. On he came. Turning, I swung around the cabin and raced toward the lake. A hundred feet away I leaped behind a tree and peered out. He was almost to the cabin now. Raising his arm, he hurled the box toward the building.

There was a terrific explosion. The ground shook beneath my feet. The cabin seemed to leap into the air, then drop back to earth again in little pieces.

Where it had been only a hole now remained.

The man, too, had disappeared, blown up, no doubt, with the building.

Where he had stood there was now a red vapor. Slowly it mounted in a thin spiral until it almost touched the lower branches of the trees. For a moment it whirled and gyrated. Then it commenced to gather itself into the semblance of a human form.

The odor of sulfur filled the air. It assailed my nostrils until I panted for breath.

The great red thing floated toward me. Its arms were reaching for me.

I turned. Then fear got the better of me. I ran—ran as I had never run before—until I had placed half a mile of forest between the ghastly thing and myself.

5. *The Face of a Dead Man*

In time of danger the human brain works rapidly. So it was that by the time I pulled myself to a halt and gave my tortured lungs a respite I had already worked out a plan of action.

Deucaleus believed me dead. That was almost a certainty. Gazing out across the lake, knowing that I was in the cabin, he had probably seen the light go out and imagined that I had retired just as I had intended doing had the discovery of Kilroy's shield not kept me awake. Then, allowing me sufficient time to fall asleep, he had sent one of his animated corpses to blow me into eternity.

In spite of what I had already seen—Flash Peters first and now this walking dead man—in spite of what Burnham and Anning had told me—I had not fully realized what I was up against until now. There, alone in the woods with the darkness of night around me and, perhaps, an enemy lurking in every shadow, the thought swept over me that we were battling with our puny intellects

the powers of another world—the powers of hell. And I—I was only a pawn in the game, probably to be sacrificed just as Lyons and Kilroy had been.

Up to that minute I had not really believed the hellish plot to be anything but something devised by a human mind. Something more outlandish and horrible than the usual—more bizarre, it is true—but, at the same time, easily explained when once the key was found. But, as I have said, alone there in the night things looked different to me. Dead men—walking cadavers! Deucaleus — a man with the power to raise men from the tomb and force them to obey his will.

There was only one thing for me to do. I must attack the devil in his own lair before he learned that his plans had gone astray. I stopped suddenly, my thoughts flashing backward. How had he learned of my presence there at Sinister Lake? How did he know that I was an enemy—a member of an organization sworn to track him down? Had the Chinaman guessed my secret? Was Conover, the postmaster, a member of the nefarious crew? Had he drawn me out and then sent me to the cabin on the lake, knowing that he was sending me to my doom just as he had possibly sent Lyons and Kilroy? Or was it the ancient graybeard at the hotel? I shook my head as each surmise filtered through my mind. There was only one possible solution. A man with such hellish powers as Deucaleus possessed would have no trouble in divining what was going on about him. And, such being the case, he would know, then, that I had missed death by a split second back in the cabin.

The problem was too deep for me. There was nothing for me to do but keep going on until I had either solved it or, like the two men who had preceded me, joined the ranks of the walking dead. So, squaring my shoulders and drawing back the safety catch of my revolver, I plunged on through the blackness of the forest in the direction of the old monastery at the other side of the lake.

Not a light greeted my eyes as I finally emerged from the tangle of trees and underbrush and gazed across the clearing which surrounded the grim old pile of masonry on three sides. On the fourth was the lake, dark and sinister even in the moonlight. Originally built on top of a little knoll which sloped gradually down to the water's edge, the present owner had, as Conover had said, added to its inaccessibility by constructing a moat some twenty feet in width entirely around it in the form of the letter "U," the lake filling in the open side.

Outside the water-filled ditch was a high, barbed-wire fence. There was but one gate; it opened onto a drawbridge only wide enough for a car to cross. Just now it was down, for what purpose I did not know. I was soon to learn, however, for within a few minutes two men—Chinamen from their appearance and attire — emerged from the woods close to where I was hiding and entered the enclosure. I waited until the door set in the big, stone front had closed behind them. Then, leaping forward, I ran across the plank structure and found cover behind one of the huge boulders with which the yard was strewn.

I was not an instant too soon. Hardly had I dodged into the shadows when the creaking of a windlass warned me that the bridge was being raised. Peering out from my hiding-place I saw it drawn up until it stood almost on end.

I was a prisoner inside the moat.

SUDDENLY I was wide awake, and yet I seemed to have been sleeping. How long I had been lying there, my body

propped against the big rock, I shall never know. Probably not as long as it seemed to me. Something was touching my hand—something that felt cold and slimy.

I was drowsy. I felt as if I had been drugged. My eyes were heavy. It seemed as if nothing mattered but sleep. Sleep I must have. I knew that I must not give way again. . . . Yet my body refused to function when my brain commanded.

Across the face of the rock grew some sort of creeping vine. My face was half buried in its tendrils. I knew that it was the plant that was overpowering me—that eventually I must succumb again to its noxious fumes. Yet I was sleepy. . . . so sleepy. . . .

Again the cold thing touched my hand. Involuntarily I turned my eyes. In front of my face a snake was coiled. Its flat, arrow-shaped head, raised some six or eight inches above the coil, wove backward and forward as it gathered momentum for the stroke. Its thin, forked tongue was extended angrily as it gazed at me with its cruel, beady eyes.

I have always had a horror of snakes. The reptile hissed. With a mighty effort I tore myself from the power of the narcotic plant. The darting head missed my cheek by the fraction of an inch. I leaped to my feet. At the same time something struck against my leather puttee. I gazed downward. A second reptile had struck. Another was coiled about my foot. I stamped it angrily into the ground with an exclamation of horror. The moonlight, filtering through the trees, showed the ground covered with them. They surrounded me, a hissing, writhing, crawling mass of loathsomeness.

I darted forward, all thought of the other danger that lurked behind the darkened windows of the old monastery forgotten. With the removal of my face from the proximity of the plant its influence over me ceased. My head cleared rapidly.

Again I wondered how long I had been lying there. Unluckily a mass of clouds floated across the face of the moon, obscuring it. There were few stars in the sky; even if there had been I was not versed in astronomy well enough to gage the time by them. But one thing kept hammering away at my consciousness. I must get to a place of safety before I was noticed by those inside the house.

I dodged from shadow to shadow until I was close to the vine-covered brick wall by the front entrance. The door loomed up before me. I halted, my ear attuned for even the slightest noise. Then I leaped into the friendly shelter of a clump of bushes growing close to the wall as the door opened and two men armed with rifles made their appearance. They, like those I had seen before, were Orientals. They separated, one going around to the rear, the other pacing up and down in front of the entrance like a sentinel. But it was only for an instant. He must have heard something. For he stopped suddenly and listened. Then he stepped into the shadow of the bush so close to me that I could have touched him with my outstretched hand.

I gathered myself for a spring. Some sixth sense warned him. He turned suddenly. But too late. My clubbed gun crashed against his head with force enough to kill an ox. I heard the bones of his skull crack. I caught his rifle as it fell from his nerveless hands and he pitched forward in a crumpled heap. Reversing the weapon, I smashed it against his head again and again. My exploring fingers found not a flutter of pulse when they touched his wrist. A

second later I had dragged him back deeper into the shadows.

My eyes, accustomed by this time to the darkness, glimpsed a basement window close to my feet. It was open. I negotiated it and felt my feet upon a hard floor. Drawing my flashlight, I pressed the button and took a hurried look about me. I was in an empty room. At the farther end was a door. I groped my way forward and opened it. Forgetting myself for a moment, I closed it, and heard the lock click. The door had fastened itself behind me. I was locked inside the old monastery.

Alone in that dark room I waited for something to happen—I knew not what. Every nerve tingled. The hair stood up on my head and the goose-flesh chased itself up and down my spinal column. The silence was nerve-racking and agonizing. I wanted to shriek.

An overpowering stench assailed my nostrils. I recognized it. It was the unmistakable odor of death.

I leaned forward, every faculty alert. My flashlight was in one hand; in the other was my revolver. Finally I mustered up courage enough to press the button again.

The thin beam of light fell full upon a face—a cold, dead face. It was the face of Jimmy Kilroy.

6. *The Devil's Mass*

MY FLASHLIGHT beam darted away. It struck another face. And then another and another. There they lay, row after row of them—bodies by the score. Attired in their grave clothes, they stared up at me glassily. Some of them were still in their coffins, some of them in rough pine boxes, and some were sprawled upon the cold, flagstone floor.

I threw caution to the winds and allowed the beam of the light to hover over everything, so badly terrified was I. I was in a huge, basement room. The walls were of stone. So, too, was the ceiling. Low though it was, it was arched; the stones showed the marks of age. In the farther end was an altar draped in black upon which stood half a dozen black candles. That I was inside some sort of chapel was apparent. Then the story Conover told me came back—the tale of the Trappist monks. This, from all indications, had been their hall of worship. Now it had been turned into something vastly different—the worshipping-place of some hellish sect engaged in unspeakable practises. I recalled a story I had once read—an article on devil-worship and Satanic masses. I had thrown it aside at the time as folderol. It had stated that such people always seized upon abandoned churches if possible, the better to carry on their diabolical rites.

The atmosphere seemed surcharged with danger. I was insane—crazed with fear. I wanted to escape from the awful charnel house—to get back to Burnham—to tell him that I was through with the service and all that it stood for. Anning's advice flashed over me. "The thing must run its course," he had said. "Leave it alone; refuse the assignment, even though it costs you your job. Sooner or later the devil—and it is the devil who is back of this—will return to the hell whence he came. Until then no human power can prevail against him."

I knew, now, that he had been right. I had rushed in heedlessly, only one thought in my mind — revenge for the wanton murder of Jerry Lyons. And now I was in too far to get out.

A noise just outside one of the doors attracted my attention. Then came the sound of voices. I looked about for a

hiding-place. The room was bare save for the altar at the end and the rows of dead.

The door was opening. I leaped behind the altar, determined to sell my life as dearly as possible. There I found an opening and crawled inside.

I was not an instant too soon. One of the doors opened and two black-robed men with goat's-head masks entered. Others followed them. Through a hole in the front of the altar I watched them. In the ceiling a number of electric lamps sprang into life. The candles upon the altar were lighted. Then the electric lights were extinguished again and the hellish rites commenced.

"Nobis Miserere mundi. . . . Domine adduua nos! . . . Domine adduua nos semper! . . ."

The leader of the two men was kneeling before the altar as he chanted the unholy mass of St. Sécaire. Slightly in the rear stood the other black-robed man in the door of what appeared to be a little sacristy. The vessels and paraphernalia for the Satanic ritual were on the table by his side. At a signal from the other he moved forward. In one hand was a gigantic toad, its green eyes blinking solemnly in the dim light; in the other was a great crucifix. I noted with a shudder that he held the tragic figure of the bleeding Christ-head downward. He placed them on the somber covering of the altar, the squat toad taking precedence, among the black tapers, over the cross.

In the background, their pasty faces only blotches in the semi-darkness, knelt five men and one woman, their heads bent forward as they watched the proceedings. Behind them, on the floor, were coffins and rough pine boxes—some of them smeared with the yellow clay of the grave—row upon row of them. In each was a grim, ghastly figure gazing through the darkness toward the ceiling with glazed, unseeing eyes.

"Sanctus . . . dominus . . . sanctus . . . gloria tibi. . . ."

The black-robed man in the sacristy door glided forward, a golden chalice in his hand. From the altar the kneeling man selected a triangular bit of black bread. Making the sign of the cross on his bosom with his left hand, he dipped the bit of bread into the contents of the holy vessel. Then, seizing a knife from his girdle—a curved, triangular dagger—he plunged it into the sopping Host. Hurling it to the floor, he stamped upon it, at the same time making the sign of the cross with his left foot.

The candles guttered and fluttered as from a sudden draft. Then they slowly faded until the place was filled with the darkness of the tomb.

IN FRONT of the altar was appearing a ball of red. It almost blinded me with its intensity as it floated in the air before my eyes. Slowly it increased in size until the whole room was filled with its glare. Dissolving, it separated itself into a thousand fragments. They bounded, cavorted and spun like tops. They fastened themselves to the walls of the room and festooned themselves like great ropes of blood from the ceiling, and were covered with a peculiar phosphorescent glow that baffled explanation.

The masked priest stood in front of the altar and adjured them. A dozen times they seemed about to obey his command as they drifted together, sometimes gathering themselves together in semi-human shapes, then dissolving again. He extended his long arms. They floated around him, caressing him; they swept over the floor, upon the altar. His eyes gleamed through his goat-like mask as he watched their antics.

Slowly, as if reluctant to depart, they gathered themselves into a compact mass again and faded away into nothingness.

The candles sprang suddenly into life.

The man in front of the altar cursed—cursed with a fluency that was horrible to hear.

"Fresh blood! I must have fresh, red blood!" he cried. "Otherwise the incantation will not work."

He stopped suddenly, his goat-like head turned sideways, his every faculty alert. The man in the doorway slid forward. The priest's arm darted upward and he pointed in the direction of the five men and one woman. The long, claw-like, yellow fingers of the other wrapped themselves around the handle of the dagger in his girdle. His eyes glittered as he sought to peer through the gloom at the row of strained, white faces gazing back at him.

The priest's finger indicated one of the watching figures. The other leaped forward like a caged panther. The dagger was raised. There was a shriek. A struggle. Another shriek. The horrible sound of keen steel penetrating human flesh. Then the fresh, pungent odor of new, red blood.

A dull, throaty moan.

"Blood, master! The fresh blood you require!"

The devil in human form stepped back within the circle of light, a ghastly, struggling human burden in his arms. He hurled it to the floor in front of the altar. It was a Chinaman clad in the conventional costume of his native land, his braided queue tied in a knot atop his shaven head.

The group in the darkness stirred, then sank back again in the attitude of devotion.

The mask of the assassin had fallen off during the struggle. He stood revealed now as a Chinaman—a tall, thin, emaciated man with pock-marked face. The skin was drawn back tightly over his cheek-bones. This and his deeply sunken eyes gave him the appearance of a man at the point of death; yet the light of fanaticism gleamed in his amber orbs as he stooped down and lifted the dying man into a kneeling position. The poor wretch gazed up at him piteously, but made no sound.

"Blood!" the yellow devil shrieked again.

He seized his victim by his long queue and, pulling his head back, plunged the knife into the jugular vein. The blood spurted like a fountain.

The priest hastily picked the chalice from the floor and held it beneath the crimson tide until it was filled to overflowing. Satisfied, he nodded to his assistant. The Chinaman dragged the twitching body of his victim to one side.

The priest dropped to his knees before the altar again and once more dipped a bit of the triangular bread into the chalice. Again he muttered the mass backward and hurled the blood-soaked Host upon the floor.

Once more the ball of red appeared in the air before the altar as the black candles fluttered and dimmed. Again it rotated and leaped, increasing in size until the entire room was filled with its reddish phosphorescence.

Then, slowly, reluctantly, the thing divided and subdivided until the room was filled with the fragments as before; only this time they took form—bloody, ghostly, vaporish caricatures of men. They grew until they were veritable giants of ghastly vapor with long, snaky arms that waved and whirled like the tentacles of devil-fish.

Again and again the black-robed priest at the altar scratched the figure of the

cross upon the floor with his left foot. The air was filled with an awful stench—the smell of decaying, putrid flesh. The blood-colored figures hovered around him, stretching forth their arms as if to caress him.

He seized the crucifix from the altar. Holding it head downward, he took a step forward. The figures fell back before him. He extended it toward them, his lips making mock of the Holy Mass.

Slowly the grim, red figures sought the coffins. They seemed to dissolve themselves within the bodies. The lid of one of the caskets fell to the floor with a clatter as the cold, dead form stood erect. A second followed. Then another and another until the space in front of the altar was filled with the dead. Their unseeing eyes gleamed in the spectral light as they turned their heads toward the man who had caused them to rise.

Only one of the grotesque creatures of bloody vapor remained. The priest pointed toward it with the crucifix. For an instant the vaporish shape whirled and danced; then it dissolved itself within the body of the murdered man. He jerked himself suddenly erect. Then he, too, joined the group around the altar.

The air was filled with an eery sound—a wailing cry that seemed to come from nowhere and to lose itself in the vast unknown.

THE priest commenced a weird, unearthly chant. The four remaining men and one woman threw themselves upon the floor. For a minute longer the black-robed man chanted. Then they, too, as his voice rose higher and higher, leaped to their feet and joined in the hellish celebration. They shrieked and leaped in a frenzy of insane revelry. They were wild, abandoned. The black-robed Chinaman seized the blood-filled chalice and, taking the lead, marched around the darkened room, the others, howling like demons from hell, dancing in his wake.

Behind them marched the dead, attempting in a stiff, clumsy manner, to imitate them in their gyrations. They moved automatically, with stiff little jerks, their arms held stiffly by their sides.

In the rear the murdered man, the blood still dripping from the gaping wound in his neck, followed.

The priest with the goat's head suddenly turned. He held up his hand for silence. The chanting stopped. He waved his hand again. The five worshippers glided out of the room. Like wooden soldiers on parade, the dead continued their march, the frenzied Oriental, the blood-filled chalice held before him, in the lead.

He stopped in front of the altar. The priest took a step forward, the inverted crucifix extended before him. The dead slunk back from it. He took another step forward. They crept back into their coffins, disposing themselves as they had lain before.

Only the murdered man was left. The priest made a sudden movement toward him, the crucifix pointed. He dropped to his knees before the altar, his rapidly stiffening arms extended in an attitude of devotion.

The room was suddenly filled with light as the Chinaman pressed the electric switch. The man with the goat's head stepped to his side.

"We win!" he exclaimed exultingly. "We win again, Ah Foon. We must rest now. For tomorrow is our big coup—the last one. The government is beginning to outguess us. And Blake will soon be here."

The Chinaman made no reply. Dropping to his knees before the altar by the

side of the man he had killed, he bowed his head as in prayer, a look of fanatical glee on his saturnine face.

"Kuei will come into his own!" he whispered, half to himself. "Kuei will come into his own. Money — much money—American money—will fill our coffers, my master—money that the faith of my forefathers may be perpetuated."

The masked man removed the covering from his face and tossed it onto the altar as he wiped the perspiration from his brow. He turned his face in my direction. I shrank back as from a blow.

I knew him. God in Heaven! Disguised though he was, I knew him.

He pressed the switch and the lights went out again. In the distance I heard them pass through the door. I was left alone—with the darkness and the dead.

7. *Deucaleus*

IT SEEMED an eternity that I lay there after they had gone, not daring to move. The darkness was overpowering; it surrounded me like a wet blanket. Gradually, too, the silence settled down until the room was quiet. It was eery. Then, at the farther end, came a phosphorescent glow. It twisted and wriggled, seeming to crawl like a great mass of worms. It filled the entire end of the cavern. It puzzled me. Then I remembered what it was. It was the glow that always emanates from bodies that have long been dead — it was the phosphorescence of the grave.

Without warning, a door opened. A man entered. I could barely discern his black shadow against the glow of the dead. For what seemed an eternity he stood there peering into the darkness, listening.

Finally, satisfied, he glided across the room and seated himself upon one of the coffins, his head bowed in an attitude of prayer.

"Oh God!" I heard him mutter. "Oh, merciful, merciful God! Have pity on me. First it was Lyons, then Kilroy. Now, must it be Blake?"

It was the voice of a man suffering the torments of hell.

Suddenly he bestirred himself. I saw the shadow raise itself to its full height.

"God help me!" he wailed again as if in prayer. "God help me to carry this thing through."

He glided toward my hiding-place. I raised the gun, the barrel protruding through the hole in the front of the altar. The hammer was raised. My finger pressed against the trigger.

"Blake!" he called softly. "Blake!"

I fired. The cavern reverberated with the terrific explosion. I saw the dark figure in front of me totter, then crumple and fall.

I leaped to my feet and plunged forward, gun in one hand, flashlight in the other. It was Deucaleus—the man who had officiated at the hellish mass—whom I had shot. I had recognized him by his voice. And, too, I had thought that I had recognized him earlier—and yet I was not prepared for what I saw.

The beam of my flashlight played across the face of my assistant chief, John Anning.

He opened his eyes as I bent over him. Upon his face was the pallor of death. He was disguised, his skin covered with some sort of dark stain. Yet I knew him as I had known him before when he wiped his brow after completing his hellish rites at the altar.

The blood was gushing from a wound in his chest where my bullet had found its mark. Yet there was a look of happiness in his eyes as he raised himself to a sitting posture, then dropped back upon

his elbow as if the effort had been too great a one.

"Thanks, Blake," he muttered. "But it will take more than the leaden slug to do the work. Give me the crucifix."

There was something about the way he said it that caused me to obey his command. Seizing the cross, he pressed it to his lips. The very presence of the holy thing seemed to revive him. He sat up and the film of death left his eyes.

"I must talk fast," he whispered hoarsely. "No, Blake, it is not death that I fear. It is something worse—far worse. Listen to me closely, boy. In a moment they will be here—Ah Foon and his hellish crew. See, the bottom of the crucifix is pointed. It was made that way that we might plant it in the dirt. But now it will serve another purpose. It must be driven into Ah Foon's chest just as it must be driven into my own heart."

He was breathing heavily. Yet he went on.

"I told you not to come. I warned you as best I could. Now that you have gotten into it, you must see it through to the end. Perhaps it is you who can save us. Obey my every command to the letter if you would escape this thing and, at the same time, kill it for ever. I have tried—oh, so hard—to beat it. But in vain. . . ."

Again and again he pressed the tragic figure of the bleeding Christ against his lips. The act of devotion seemed to revive him. He turned to me again.

"Remember Yip See Foon?" he demanded. "We caught him — you and Burnham and Lyons and Kilroy and I—caught him and saw to it that he was electrocuted for killing poor Tommy Phillips ten years ago. He was in that narcotic raid when we broke up the gang. We caught him red-handed and sent him to his doom.

"He was a devil-worshipper, Blake—the high priest of the cult of Kuei which has its foundations in the mountains of Ho-Nan. Ah Foon is his brother. He swore then—swore by the gods of his forefathers — that he would return and punish us. And Blake"—his voice was lowered until I could barely hear it—"Blake, those gods were the gods of hell —the trio of devils—Lucifer, Deucaleus and Satan!

"You know how truly he has kept his word. I have been his instrument. Lyons is gone. Kilroy is gone. You—you and Burnham will follow unless you obey me implicitly.

"Listen!" His voice was wailing and sad, gaining strength, it seemed, each minute. "Again I say, Blake, that I am the instrument through which he worked. I am possessed of the devil! Deucaleus has taken possession of my body. Do you understand? I have tried—oh God, how I have tried!—to throw it off. But in vain. He is always within me, sometimes to a lesser degree and sometimes to a greater. At his command I have done these many, many things. It was his plan, working through me—because I would be the last to be suspected and the first to learn of what was going on—to flood the country with counterfeits—to stage a fast coup—to raise enough money to carry on the propagation of his faith for many, many years to come. Here in this old monastery he has set up his plant. From here he has caused me to raise the bodies of the dead—dead filched from many burying-grounds—and has forced them to do his bidding. Think how easy it has been, Blake. For how can the officials punish a dead man? And the instant this hellish power was withdrawn the body became what it was before—a putrid mass of flesh."

ABOVE us we could hear the patter of many feet. The sound of the gun had attracted the attention of Ah Foon and the others, or else they had found the body of the guard I had killed and were investigating.

Anning was talking fast now—talking as he gasped for breath. His life was fading fast away.

"They are coming. . . . Get Ah Foon. . . . Shoot him! . . . The others do not matter. They will disappear when he and I are gone. . . . But you must —*must*, I say—do what I tell you."

THE door burst open. Ah Foon, his pock-marked face white and strained, plunged into the room at the head of a yellow horde. He snapped on the lights.

"Shoot!" Anning screamed.

I was spellbound—hypnotized. I tried to raise the gun. My arm hung motionless by my side. It seemed paralyzed. The gun dropped from my fingers.

The dying man made a mighty effort and grasped it. The pock-marked Chinaman was almost upon us now, the others a pace behind. He screamed as Anning pulled the trigger—screeched and then landed in a sprawling heap close beside the body of the man who had shot him. The others halted, too terrified to move.

"The cross! The cross!" Anning shrieked.

And still I could not move. Like the horde of yellow men huddled in the doorway, I was spellbound—chained to the floor by a will stronger than my own.

The eyes of Ah Foon glared up at me. They seemed to sear into my very brain. His hideous face was twisted into a sardonic grin.

"You are tied fast!" he snarled. "You can not raise your arm. I, with the power of Kuei behind me, decree it."

Anning raised himself to his elbow with his last ounce of strength.

"Quick, Blake! Quick!" he screamed. "He is coming back. The devil is seizing me again!"

He hurled himself forward, the crucifix held between his outstretched hands. He plunged it into the breast of the yellow man. Ah Foon shrieked. God, how he screamed as the sharp point pierced his breast! He writhed like a frog upon a spit. Then his limbs drew up spasmodically. He seemed to shrivel. Little spirals of smoke came from his mouth and nose. He seemed to be burning—to be falling away. His body was aglow with the flames that were eating at his vitals.

Anning dragged the crucifix from the Chinaman's heart.

"Now into my heart!" he screamed. "Quick, Blake—can't you see that in another second it will be too late?"

His face was changing. As true as there is a God in Heaven, he was changing before my eyes. His ears were becoming sharp and pointed. His chin was peaked. His eyes were turning to malevolent little slits while his lips drew back over fangs—fangs of a wolf.

And from his forehead two horns seemed to protrude.

Within the body of the man two forces were struggling. He was writhing, twisting, squealing. Froth dropped from his mouth. But still the best that was in his make-up fought for the mastery over the horrible thing that had his soul within its grasp.

Slowly, jerkily, inch by inch as if another hand was holding it back, he brought the crucifix up to a level with his eyes. The sharpened point was finally pressed against his breast.

"Strike! For Christ's sake, Blake, strike!" he screamed.

I could not move. The cross was being

drawn away again—dragged back by the terrible unseen power that was mastering him.

The human brain could stand no more. My head became a black, empty void. I pitched forward. My body fell across that of the struggling, writhing man upon the floor. I felt the cross plunge into the flesh. My weight drove it in—in until only the extended arms and head of the bleeding Christ showed above the wound.

He screamed. Then his struggles ceased.

The air was filled with a weird, whistling, howling wail. It assailed my ears until the drums throbbed and my brain rattled like a pea in an empty basket. Over everything was a bloody, reddish glare. The acrid smell of sulfur seared my nostrils.

I rolled to one side. Instinctively my fingers sought the cross and grasped it. Like a man in a dream I saw the bodies of the dead rise from their coffins and disappear in a flood of blinding light. Then came oblivion.

When I awoke the room was bare. Even the altar was gone. Beside me lay my gun. My outstretched fingers still grasped the crucifix. Beneath it lay a little pile of ashes. Close by, where Ah Foon had met his doom, was another pile.

It was morning. Outside the sun was shining. A puff of vagrant wind blew in through the open door.

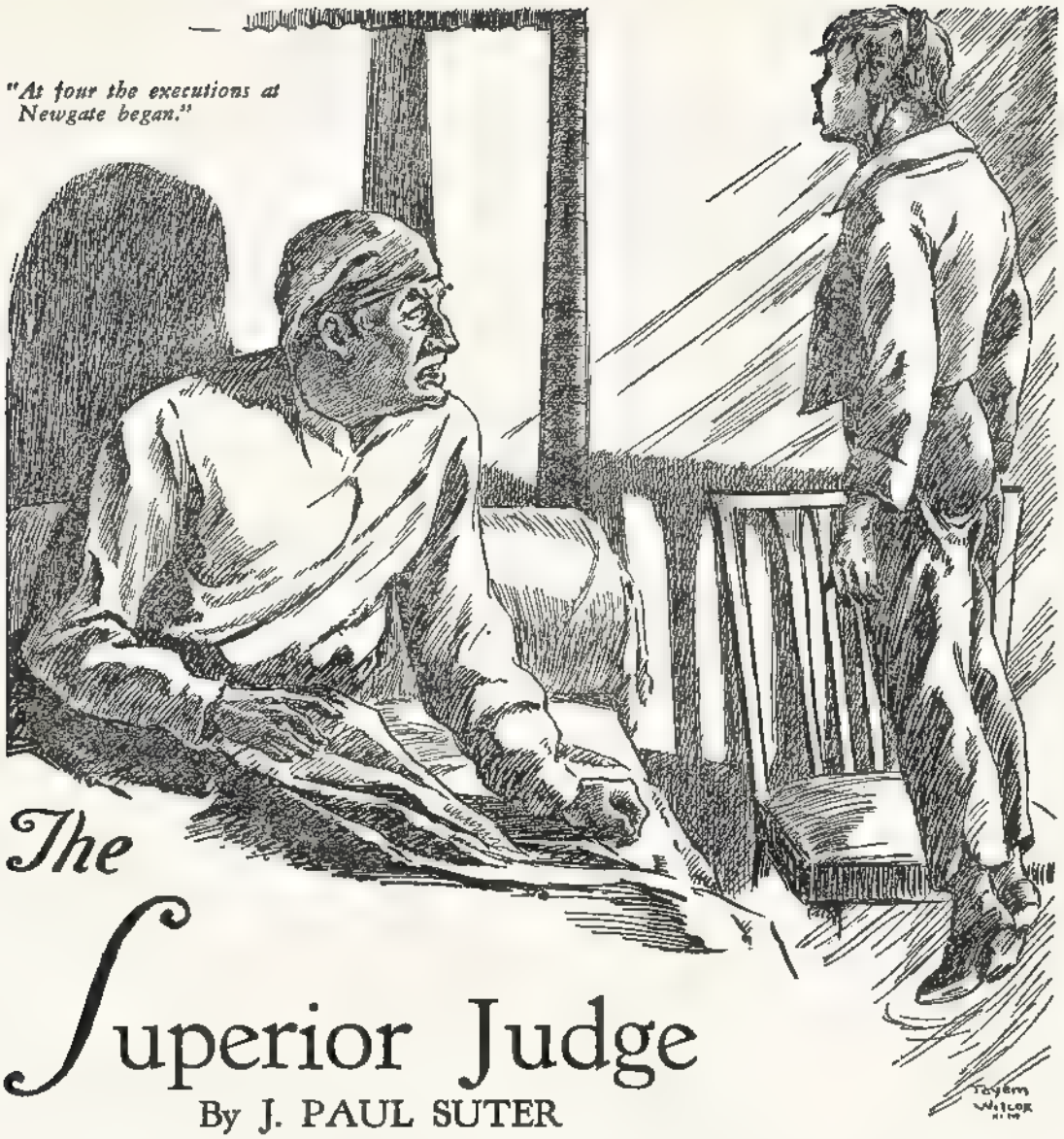
The ashes disappeared.

The House by the Sea

By FRANCES ELLIOTT

A graying image sedged with rutted grass,
  With curtained eyes it faces the slow hours
  As immobile as dustless waxen flowers
Embalmed beneath dim sterile globes of glass.
Its darkened contours blot from out its sight
  The flashing suns that seek the destiny
  Of twilight seas; and crystal mystery
Of quivering waves that leap into the night.

The roses blow untended by the wall,
  The hyacinth spills perfume to the spring;
  Along the dunes the lilting sea winds sing
As masted ships ride by to ports of call.
And men forget the secret of the dream
That fires its tapers with a pallid gleam.



"At four the executions at Newgate began."

The Superior Judge

By J. PAUL SUTER

The author of "Beyond the Door" tells an unusual and compelling story of the days when an eight-year-old child could be hanged by English law for hitting a court official with a stone

ONE of the high achievements of civilization is to keep dyspeptic and gouty old gentlemen from being as mean as they would like to be. Year by year, we hit on new ways of heading one another off. Our legislatures write the new ways into laws, and the old gentlemen find it increasingly difficult to express their natural, savage selves. No doubt they are much more angelic now, by virtue of the things they are not permitted to do, than the old gentlemen of a hundred years ago.

Take the case of Sir Thomas Thorneycraft. He might be today, as then, a Superior Judge of London town. He might have gout, coupled with an obstinate, pig-headed nature, developed by

long years of authority. Some of us still are afflicted with that combination. But he would not have the English laws of a century ago to administer, nor the Superior Judge's authority; and he could not have sentenced little Willie Hardesty.

It was morning in London town; foggy, smelly morning, with damp vapors coming in from the Thames. Sir Thomas was beginning the day true to form. He reached for the bell-pull. Slightly miscalculating its distance, he knocked his most gouty toe against the massive carved base of his breakfast table. He bellowed for Magruder; and at the same moment perceived Magruder, already standing within the doorway.

"Damme, what d'ye mean by it?" Sir Thomas queried, hotly. "You're after my life, that's what it is. You know I can't live without eating. Take it away!"

"Is it the potato, Your Lordship?" inquired Magruder, coming forward, with no great apprehension on his elderly countenance.

"The bacon, man, the bacon! Can I eat flabby stuff like that? You know that only crisp bacon agrees with my stomach."

"I shall have it replaced at once, Your Lordship," soothed Magruder; but his master's choleric little eyes abruptly fixed him with suspicion.

"You were coming in when I rang, Magruder. What the devil did you want?"

"Calgrave is below, Your Lordship."

"Calgrave? Does he think I want his hangman face here?"

"He wishes to speak with Your Lordship."

"Dammit, am I to have no privacy? Must they even invade my breakfast chamber? Must the common hangman himself come to see me?"

"Your Lordship wishes me to show him up?" Magruder inquired, imperturbably.

"Of course, show him up. Don't stand there talking, man. Show him up. It's the quickest way to be rid of him."

Magruder was gone like a shadow; but the door had not closed on him when a weighty thought occurred to Sir Thomas.

"Magruder!" he bellowed. "Magruder! Hang the man, can't he wait until I am through speaking before he slips out? Magruder!"

"Your Lordship called?"

He reappeared, respectful and calm, and stood at easy attention. His master glared at him. Then, as the consideration which had brought about this recall permeated the magisterial mind, Sir Thomas' face twitched prophetically. What the twitching prophesied was a roguish smile, which crinkled the excess skin about his eyes, and presently lent him that expression of astounding amiability often observed in pictures of prize-fighters, snapped within the sacred precincts of the family circle. Sir Thomas went the entire length. He grinned, at the same time licking his lips suggestively.

"Magruder!" he began.

"Your Lordship?"

"I wish to give you this while it is in my mind. For dinner, this evening, Magruder, you may procure——" He paused and smiled again—an external symptom of the inner glow. "You may procure a lobster. A hen lobster, Magruder. Broil it—not too much; the last one was just a trifle overdone. A broiled lobster, Magruder! Show Calgrave up."

The serving-man hesitated, with a rather apprehensive countenance.

"Your Lordship will pardon me—Your Lordship has not forgotten Sir Philip Riggs' orders?"

His Lordship had not. His instantaneous change of expression made that evi-

dent. It was evident, too, that he recalled the orders of his physician without pleasure.

"It is no part of your duty, Magruder, to act as my medical adviser," he declared, tartly.

Magruder bowed.

"A lobster of the same size as that I served Your Lordship two evenings ago?" he inquired, blandly. "The one which gave Your Lordship nightmares?"

Sir Thomas caught the reminder, and resented it; but it seemed too subtle to act upon. On the whole, he thought best to ignore it, though his eyes flashed, and the remnant of his good humor shriveled.

"Show Calgrave up," he directed.

IT SEEMED that the visitor could not have been far distant, despite the spacious areas of the Superior Judge's mansion; for, almost at once, Calgrave stood before him.

"Well, well, Calgrave, what the devil——" began Sir Thomas; and stopped, with the excuse of a coughing-spell. It was often so, with those who addressed Calgrave. The London hangman had none of the grisly accouterments of his office. In his street clothes, he was a sober, respectable citizen, without a hint of ruthlessness in his manner. If his thin, tall figure and austere countenance conveyed anything unusual, what they hinted at was kindliness, buried deep behind somber eyes. Men never took liberties with Calgrave. With a legion of capital offenses on the statute books, the England of a century ago was a precarious dwelling-place for even the most highly favored of fortune. One could never be sure of not meeting Calgrave in a professional capacity before—just before—one died.

This consideration could hardly have occurred to Sir Thomas; yet, after the coughing-spell, he amended his first hasty greeting.

"I go to court within the hour, Calgrave."

"I shall not detain Your Lordship more than a few minutes. I have come about little Willie Hardesty."

The hangman paused, but Sir Thomas' face remained blank.

"Today is his birthday, Your Lordship. He is eight years old. They have been having a little party for him in the prison, I understand."

"Yes, yes. Well?"

"He is to be hanged tomorrow morning, as Your Lordship may remember."

"I remember nothing about it," Sir Thomas declared, testily.

"Your Lordship sentenced him a matter of a month ago. He was a member of a troupe of strolling players—very clever in child parts, they say—a pretty little boy with golden curls and large, blue eyes."

"I sentence a man on the evidence, not on his appearance," Sir Thomas observed.

"In this case, Your Lordship, the condemned is not a man but a child."

"The law of England makes no distinction. If I sentenced the fellow, he deserved it."

The hangman's thin mouth tightened.

"No doubt, Your Lordship. The reputation of Your Lordship's court is high. The little fellow threw a stone, which struck an officer of the law——"

"Ah!" Sir Thomas' chubby face screwed itself into the set expression which was dreaded on the bench. "The facts begin to return to me. It was my own court bailiff, Jones."

"Jones did not intend to lodge a complaint, Your Lordship. Another officer saw the affair and took the child into custody."

"I have it now, I have it!" The judge

half rose from his chair at the table, rubbing his fat hands together with gusto. "It was a pretty point of law. The fellow threw a stone. Did he throw it with malice, or without malice? If without malice, he goes free, with a reprimand for his carelessness—or perhaps a light sentence; if with malice, he hangs. Yes, yes, I recall it perfectly now. It gave me quite an interesting morning. I ruled that the stone was thrown with malice, did I not?"

"Which means hanging," Calgrave acquiesced, soberly. "Possibly Your Lordship, in weighing the legal issues involved, overlooked the extreme youth of the prisoner."

The suggestion was unfortunate. Sir Thomas stiffened.

"I am not in the habit of committing oversights on the King's Bench," he said, tartly. "That fool, Spensey, took it upon himself to defend this fellow. He saw to it that the matter of youthfulness was presented *ad nauseum*. I decided the case on the evidence."

"The prisoner is a tiny child. Though he is eight today, he hardly looks more than five. I am sure, if Your Lordship saw him again, Your Lordship would temper justice with mercy."

"Lookee here, Calgrave." Sir Thomas rose and stepped clear of his breakfast table, to shake a thick finger under the hangman's nose. "Are you trying to tell me my duty?"

"Certainly not, Your Lordship."

"Then you are seeking to avoid some work. Well, you shall not. Take that for your answer, and let me return to my breakfast."

The hangman did not flinch. Rumor had it that he had once been a man of social standing, who had entered incognito into his sinister calling for reasons of his own. Perhaps this fact, if it chanced to be a fact, emboldened him to meet Sir Thomas' intolerant eyes.

"If I may say so without offense," he observed, calmly, "it would have taken less time—less work, as Your Lordship is pleased to call it—to hang the child than to make this visit. In my time, Your Lordship, I have deprived many persons of God's gift of life; men, women, and children. But never such a little child as this, Your Lordship."

"There's no use prolonging this, Calgrave. You have my answer," Sir Thomas said, sourly.

The hangman continued, as if he had not heard.

"They have tried to make the little fellow happy in prison, Your Lordship. They have bought him toys, and even some of the worst characters play games with him and tell him stories—clean stories, Your Lordship, such as a little child may listen to without harm. He does not understand what is to happen to him tomorrow morning. They have thought best not to tell him of it."

Sir Thomas wheeled deliberately and lumbered back to his breakfast table, jerking the bell-pull on his way. He turned his obstinate old face once more toward the hangman.

"If you have come to beg a pardon—as I suppose you have—you may go back and do your duty. I decided this case on the evidence. Magruder will show you out."

Calgrave bowed, and walked slowly to the door. He met the old serving-man coming in. The two of them exchanged glances. Sir Thomas' visitor sadly, and just perceptibly, shook his head. Immediately, then, the hangman was gone, and Sir Thomas Thorneycraft was free to soothe his ruffled feelings with the crisp bacon which Magruder was bringing on an elaborately chased brass tray.

IT SEEMED, however, that Sir Thomas' feelings were not to remain soothed, that day. First among his vexations, on the way from his mansion to the King's court, his carriage was caught in the congested London traffic, and delayed several minutes. Though not a novel incident, this was one which never lost its appeal to his irascibility. He rose to the occasion, and expressed himself with freshness and vigor. He was still apoplectic of countenance and inclined to mutter a few belated imprecations under his breath when, duly robed and bewigged, he took his place upon the bench.

It was a bad day for prisoners before the bar. Experienced pleaders to that court—such as were not merely crafty, in common with most members of their profession, but who might be said to have been also "Thorneycrafty" — noted the glint in Sir Thomas' baleful eye, and at once began to recollect reasons why their clients' cases should be postponed to a more auspicious session. Before the day was over, those who had neglected that precaution regretted their lack of sagacity.

The imposing of heavy sentences whetted rather than satisfied Sir Thomas' spleen. Even his hearty lunch failed to soothe him. Late in the afternoon, with his version of English justice concluded rather early for that day, he found himself somewhat more choleric and gouty, if possible, than in the morning. As he limped down the stairs to the side entrance reserved for the justices, he had anticipated the probability that his coachman would be late, and was working himself up to the proper degree of frenzy.

Certainly the young man who approached him at the justices' entrance had chosen an unpropitious moment. This young man, whose rather pallid face was lifted from dullness by expressive and intelligent eyes, seemed more than half prepared for the warm reception he received.

"If Your Lordship pleases——" he began, timidly.

Sir Thomas reddened, and stopped, bristling, in his tracks.

"Well, Spensey! When will you young whippersnappers who call yourselves barristers learn that I have no time for talk when I am leaving court? You stumble on a case once in a blue moon, and usually lose it, and it makes you feel as puffed up as the Lord Mayor himself. Well, sir, why don't you tell me what you wish? Have you no tongue in your head? D'ye think I can stand here all day waiting for you to speak?"

The young man began talking rapidly, with the possible object of getting his petition stated before the inevitable torrent of words cut him short.

"A young boy is to be hanged, Your Lordship. He is guiltless of intentional wrong-doing. I defended him in court, but circumstances were against him. Unless Your Lordship intervenes, the majesty of England will be stained with innocent blood—the blood of a little child. I am sure that Your Lordship, with Your Lordship's kind heart——"

Sir Thomas had at last recovered sufficiently from the first shock of his indignation to express himself. What he said was spoken at some length, but tumultuously. The young lawyer at first looked him hopefully in the eye; then turned with bowed head and walked slowly away.

"And in the future you need not block my way and address yourself to me. And you need expect to win no cases that you conduct before me," Sir Thomas finished, raising his voice to a shout so that the sentiment should not be wasted.

He turned gingerly, to await his carriage in the justices' private office, but

paused at the threshold for another vindictive look at the retreating figure of his discomfited petitioner.

That was Sir Thomas' mistake; though, had he merely looked swiftly and gone on his way, he might even then have avoided disaster. Being near-sighted, however, he did not perceive the stooping Spensey. When perception did come, it was through another sense than sight. Something small and hard, and in very rapid motion, struck the side of Sir Thomas' nose; and the Superior Judge, with a roar of pain, clapped both hands to that red and prominent member.

"Help! Treason! Call the bailiff! Murder is being committed on me!" he cried, wildly, to whoever might chance to hear.

Instinctively, he shut both eyes as a precaution against further assaults; but opened them again when the answer to his alarm came from immediately in front of him.

"Hang me, if you will, Herod! Cowardly slayer of children! I can throw stones, too! I'm not running from you. Take me and hang me!"

It was Spensey; Spensey transfigured by a sudden burst of white fury. His pale face had become livid. His dark eyes wept with excess of anger. Dropping another stone, which he had snatched up in case the first should miss its mark, he shook his fist under Sir Thomas' nose.

"I threw that stone with malice—with malice, d'ye hear, you old coward? Hang me, if you will!"

Sir Thomas recoiled a step; Spensey advanced the same distance, still shaking his fist and pouring out vituperation, like a man beside himself. The Superior Judge raised his voice in a shrill cry of fear, which had a gurgling sound, owing to the rather copious red stream flowing across his mouth toward his ample paunch. Expecting further personal violence, he leapt backward; which was his second mistake.

For the court bailiff had just emerged on the run from the justices' entrance. With him Sir Thomas collided, very forcibly. They went down together.

Sir Thomas emitted another roar. His gouty foot had struck the stone step.

"Murder! Bailiff!" he shrieked, breathlessly.

THE court bailiff possessed that rare and fortunate faculty, presence of mind. There was a chance that the Superior Judge might not realize who had caused his fall—a slim chance, but well worth taking. The bailiff had hardly touched the stone flagging before he was up again and a good leap away from the roaring and kicking magistrate.

"Here, Your Lordship! Coming, My Lord!" he shouted, in stentorian tones; and he was the first, out of the crowd that had gathered, to reach Sir Thomas and stand that gentleman upon his one still serviceable foot.

"Send for His Lordship's carriage! Lean on me, Your Lordship. Was it a murderous assault on Your Lordship's person?"

"There's the man! Take him into custody!" commanded Sir Thomas, waving his arm toward the crowd, all but one of whom backed away precipitately. That one was Spensey. He was calm again, and very pale.

"I am here, Mr. Bailiff. You need not fear my escaping. My death will be a very slight stain upon the majesty of England, compared with the murder of a child."

"Take him! Clap him into irons! Why don't you take him? Where the devil is Riggs? Does the fool think I can wait

till he goes his rounds? Doesn't he know I'm seriously injured?"

Considering that Sir Philip Riggs, that eminent surgeon, could not possibly have been summoned as yet, his absence might easily have been explained—to any one but Sir Thomas. Fortunately, explanation proved unnecessary. The Superior Judge's carriage, which had been blocked in the traffic of the city, whirled up. The smitten luminary of the King's Bench was lifted in—not without a volley of abuse at all within hearing, which, proceeding from a lesser dignitary, would have been actionable at the civil law. Spensey left in custody, and as good as hanged. Sir Thomas settled cursing into the cushions, in the company of a court attaché, who wisely remained silent. Thus they returned to the Superior Judge's mansion.

TUCKED into his massive, four-poster bed by the humble Magruder, the magistrate waited impatiently for his physician's arrival. When Sir Philip appeared, through the silken curtains dividing the bedroom from the other apartments of Sir Thomas' personal suite, that impatience overflowed into scurrilous reflections upon the doctor's standing in his profession. Sir Philip Riggs, however, lean and prosperous, had learned to treat the irascibility of wealthy patients as subtle humor. When they damned him, he chuckled, appreciatively, and added a percentage to their bills.

"Ah, I wish I possessed Your Lordship's wit!" he retorted, after a silent examination. "Injured seriously—seriously, I fear—yet Your Lordship must have your jest!"

"Serious, you say?" The Superior Judge became instantly apprehensive.

Sir Philip stroked his narrow chin, gravely. Long practise in his profession had taught him the technic of delay in answering a question. Delay engenders suspense, and suspense is the proper attitude of mind for a patient.

"The nose is very near the brain," he said, at length. "Any injury in that region may have evil results."

Sir Thomas' florid countenance began to assume the color of rich pie-crust.

"Not fatal results? You didn't say fatal results?"

Sir Philip buckled his professional bag, and paused with one hand on the silken curtains of the doorway.

"It is rather too early to commit one's self," he returned, with dignity. "I shall be with Your Lordship in the morning."

He left a chastened patient, who lay back hopelessly upon the pillow; but he left him at about the dinner hour. To Sir Thomas that was the chief hour of the day—the climax, toward which the hours from breakfast on naturally ascended. The chastened man at length gathered enough energy to ring for Magauder.

"Dammit, Magruder, am I to have no dinner tonight?" he demanded.

"Your Lordship's dinner is preparing," was the encouraging reply. "Sir Philip said Your Lordship might have a little weak broth, with some toast."

Sir Thomas sat up in bed, with some excitement.

"He said that, did he? Did you tell him you had a lobster?"

Magruder coughed behind his hand.

"Why, no, Your Lordship, I did not," he returned.

"He said nothing to you about it?"

"About the lobster, Your Lordship? I am sure it could not have occurred to him."

"Did he say I was not to have lobster?"

"Not exactly that, Your Lordship. He said weak broth——"

"Magruder!" The patient lay back

upon his pillow, spent with exertion, but without change in the idea which had strengthened him to sit up. "I am rather knocked up, Magruder. I need nourishment. Weak broth and toast would be of very little benefit to me. You may serve the broiled lobster as you originally planned."

The elderly serving-man staggered with consternation. He was speechless for a moment, but at length managed a feeble remonstrance.

"The doctor said weak broth and toast, Your Lordship."

"Serve the broth and toast, Magruder," His Lordship acquiesced, complacently. "Serve any damned thing. But let me have my broiled lobster, too."

Long years of browbeating, endured as a matter of course, struggled in Magruder's bosom with his really profound sense of duty. Duty won, for the moment.

"Your Lordship will pardon my presumption. I had a father, Your Lordship —not a man of Your Lordship's station, of course, but he was injured somewhat similarly—about the nose, I mean. It was a brawl in a public house, Your Lordship —a rather vulgar affair, I fear. He ate a large dish of shrimps, that night. He was very fond of them."

"Well, Magruder?" Sir Thomas spoke coldly, but his attention was won.

"Though I was very small at the time, Your Lordship, I remember how we heated a salt brick in the fire, and wrapped it in cloths to place against his stomach. It gave him relief, but did not save him, Your Lordship."

"Eh? You mean he died?"

"The next day, Your Lordship."

Sir Thomas sat up again.

"Was your father an old man?" he demanded.

"Somewhat younger than Your Lordship."

"He ate a good many of the shrimps?"

"Yes, Your Lordship; but, if I may say so, it requires a quantity of shrimps to equal the size of a lobster."

The magistrate sighed. His head sank upon his breast, and he plunged into melancholy. He was silent for a time.

"Is it a hen lobster, Magruder? A nice one?" he breathed, softly, at length.

"Yes, Your Lordship. A large one."

Again Sir Thomas sighed. Tears came to his eyes. He drummed with his fingers on the striped coverlet.

"You may serve the lobster, Magruder," he concluded, at last. "I do not expect to eat it all, but a little will be nourishing."

MAGRUDER did not try to soften defeat—he omitted the broth and toast. What ascended on a tray to greet the enraptured though impatient nostrils of the Superior Judge was a sizable lobster, broiled to that degree of reddish brownness, stopping just short of deep cherry, which only cooks who live for their art rather than by it can achieve. Served in a deep dish, it paddled luscious claws in a sauce compounded of melted butter and vinegar. Chopped parsley revealed its presence in the sauce, though without ostentation. A tankard of beer rode on the tray alongside the dish. It was a small tankard, and Magruder had deemed beer better for his master than the more heating wine. Potatoes, chipped and browned, were present. Buttered crackers, sprinkled with salt and merely tanned in the oven, acted as guard of honor. If Sir Thomas were doomed to die for the lobster, at least he was to die with gastronomic distinction.

"A-a-ah!" he respirated, with deep feeling.

"Shall I fetch Your Lordship's night-cap? The evening air is a trifle damp," solicited Magruder.

"If you please, Magruder," agreed his master, benignly.

The night-cap, a high-peaked affair of red flannel, hid the magisterial bald spot, and converted Sir Thomas into a passable counterfeit of one of those little crockery-ware men, made in Italy, which often adorn broad lawns.

"Your Lordship will remember not to indulge too heartily?"

The Superior Judge had been carefully propped up in bed, blankets behind him and the enticing tray before. He chose to evade the question.

"You may go, Magruder. When you are needed, I shall ring."

Half an hour later, he did ring. He had flung the propping pillows and blankets to the floor, and he lay on his back, looking rather guilty. Magruder tucked him in, and, with a sigh, removed the tray. Sir Thomas had kept to the letter of his promise. He had not eaten all of the lobster. Part of one claw remained untouched.

"Now, I will sleep," the patient announced, with placid confidence.

Retiring, Magruder rearranged the candles in the spacious bedroom, so that unwelcome rays of light should not intrude beneath his master's eyelids. He had just reached the door when the somnolent one became animated.

"The confounded thing pains me!" Sir Thomas declared. "Damn that Spensey!"

"Your Lordship's nose?"

"Bring a candle, Magruder; and a mirror."

These helps to knowledge revealed that the injured member was enormously swollen and far redder than it had been; but the candle's uncertain light left the precise spot of greatest swelling in doubt. That point loomed important in Sir Thomas' memory. He had not forgotten Riggs' sinister implications.

"Is it the bridge or the extremity? Speak up, man!" he demanded of Magruder.

"I should say it is rather puffed up all the way, Your Lordship," replied that faithful servant.

"But where is it worst? Where is it largest?"

"If Your Lordship will remain still, I will look at it from all angles."

Sir Thomas remained comparatively still. Magruder made the journey around the foot of the bed, candle in hand, trying earnestly to concentrate on his master's most prominent feature, but peering fascinatedly in spite of himself into the choleric little eyes, which were impatiently following his inspection trip.

"Well? Well?" demanded the patient.

"I should say, Your Lordship, that the upper portion of Your Lordship's nose is a little the larger—in proportion, that is to say."

"Magruder, you're a fool! If I need you, I shall ring."

"Very good, Your Lordship."

But the old man was still within hearing when a horrid thought assailed the invalid.

"You will be sure to stay within call, Magruder? You'll remember I am helpless? I've always been a good master to you, Magruder."

This mood, though infrequent, was not entirely unfamiliar. It corresponded with occasions of slight illness, in each of which Sir Thomas was likely to believe that his end was near.

"Your Lordship is an excellent master. One touch of the bell-cord, and I shall be at Your Lordship's side."

He was permitted to depart, and Sir Thomas gave himself up to unpleasant

reflections, which, as might have been expected from the legal mind of the thinker, took a very logical course. The starting-point had to do with Sir Philip Riggs' remark. The nose is near the brain, he had said. Any injury to the nose is likely to prove—did he say "fatal?" Magruder had declared that the top of Sir Thomas' nose was the more swollen in proportion. The top is nearer the brain. Therefore——

In his excitement, Sir Thomas kicked the gouty foot against his writing-desk, which was kept conveniently at one side of the bed. A few profane remarks slipped out. He stopped them in mid-career, and broke out into a cold sweat at realization of what he had been doing. He had been profane at the brink of the grave! The top of his nose, near the brain, was seriously injured, and he had been profane!

In the end, he fell asleep; but neither a swollen nose nor a gouty toe is a good sleeping-potion. Besides, his stomach felt slightly uneasy. He awoke again, to reflections of deeper gloom; exhaustedly dropped into another pool of restless slumber; returned to consciousness, dripping with slimy recollections of bad dreams. He longed to ring for Magruder, but fear for his own spiritual welfare made him unnaturally considerate. The old man might be sleeping. To awaken him except for urgent reasons would be something of a sin; and Sir Thomas felt that sin was a luxury he could not afford, just now. He lay still in his wakeful intervals, and shivered at the pulsating shadows cast by the rich candelabra. At the far end of the room, beyond the foot of the bed, were the closed silken curtains which shut off the next apartment of his private suite. These curtains swayed in a draft from some invisible source. Their movement annoyed Sir Thomas, producing in him a feeling which fell just short of horror. More than once, his hand was on the bell-cord to summon Magruder, but he desisted.

On the whole, he was passing a decidedly uncomfortable night. He took to counting the hours as they boomed out from a neighboring church. Each repetition cheered him a little; that much of the night was gone. It must have been somewhat before three in the morning when he fell into his only profound sleep of that wakeful vigil. His body relaxed. His nose and the gouty toe seemed to have signed a truce. Lying on his back, with open mouth, he surrendered to the bliss of complete unconsciousness, not even disturbed by his own reverberating snores.

CONSCIENCE seldom caused Sir Thomas' heart to miss a beat. The period through which he now slept, with the peace of an infant (if an infant could be supposed to have become old and fat, and to suffer from a little catch in its breathing) was one which had twice been called, with some force, to his attention. At four, the executions at Newgate began. Calgrave had reminded Sir Thomas that little Willie Hardesty was to die that morning. Spensey had emphasized the reminder. Yet the justice slept, until he awakened at the sound of a distant bell.

By itself, the bell's tolling could hardly have broken his slumbers; coming from far away through the clear, still air preceding dawn, it struck his ear-drums with no great force. But it had an ally. Coincident with its beginning, or thereabouts, something of the nature of a large, unsentimental hand seemed to grip Sir Thomas' plump stomach, and to squeeze. He awoke yelling, and in fear. For the distant tolling of the bell insisted itself through his physical pain, and,

though he would not have admitted to himself that he understood its message, yet he did understand.

"Magruder!" he shrieked; but, remembering that his voice could hardly carry through the corridors and rooms, he managed to straighten himself enough to jerk the bell-cord.

"Magruder, I'm dying!" he elucidated, hoarsely; and, before his serving-man, newly entered and trying to shake himself awake, could reply — "What's that bell tolling?"

"They toll the bell while the executions are in progress, Your Lordship. I think there are five, this morning. Little Willie Hardesty is to be the last. The tolling will stop when they are finished, Your Lordship."

"Magruder! Where are you, Magruder?" demanded Sir Thomas, faintly.

"I am here, Your Lordship."

"He called me an old coward, Magruder. He called me a slayer of children. He tried to kill me with a stone, Magruder."

"Your Lordship must try to sleep. I will send one of the servants for Sir Philip."

"Not yet. No time now." The patient sat up, gripping his stomach with both hands, and rocking backward and forward in agony. "He was right, Magruder. I'm a wicked man. Get paper and a pen. I must not die with their blood on my soul."

The old man hurried wonderingly to the desk on the farther side of the bed.

"Pardons, Magruder. Spensey and the boy," his master gasped, between convulsive movements.

"I hardly believe that Mr. Spensey is sentenced as yet, Your Lordship."

"Damn it, man, hurry!" the magistrate exploded. "Can't you hear the bell? Don't you know they're killing him?"

Magruder bent over the desk, and began searching nervously for a pen.

"There it is, in front of your nose!" directed his master. "There's the bell again. The ink is there—there——"

He broke off, with something between a sob and a groan, and clutched at his stomach. But his ears were sharpened for the sound that came with regular beat through the morning air.

"The bell! Can't you hurry, man? Do you want me to die with that boy's blood on me? Take any piece of paper, confound you!" His voice rose to a screech. "Let me write it, you old fool! Give me the pen!"

But he doubled up again before the quill was in the ink. Magruder, growing calmer each second, snatched at the writing-materials and began to scratch across the foolscap.

"Sign here, Your Lordship!" he urged, disregarding his master's groans.

The sweat was beading Sir Thomas' forehead; but he bit his lip and took the quill. As the bell boomed again, he sprawled his name across the document, and Magruder affixed the magisterial seal.

"I'll take it myself, Your Lordship. One of the servants will go for Sir Philip." Magruder fairly shot out of the room, calling the last words over his shoulder.

SIR THOMAS lay on his back, gasping for breath. Though the pain was giving him a moment of respite, he felt that his end was near. He listened for the bell, which still boomed with slow, regular intervals. He tried to remember how long each execution required. It was years since he had viewed one personally, but the details came back with uncomfortable vividness: the ribald crowd, laughing, cursing, exchanging bets on the gameness of the condemned; the sinister

platform, a little above their heads; the business-like executioner; the victim. Calgrave was a giant of a man. Sir Thomas thought of that fact, and at once, despite his utmost desire to the contrary, contrasted it with the slight figure of the golden-haired child to whom he had refused mercy. The pain gripped his stomach again, but he hardly noticed it. Instead, he listened with exquisite apprehension for the bell.

Presently it tolled twice, in quick succession, and was silent.

Quivering, Sir Thomas struggled again to a sitting position.

"Magruder!" he called, aimlessly. "Has the bell stopped, Magruder?" Then, as the certainty of what he feared gripped him: "Did I pardon him too late? Had they——?"

He choked, and slowly sank back upon the pillows. His questions had been merely thoughts, spoken aloud. He had expected no reply from Magruder, who could not have returned, nor, by any possibility, have arrived before the bell had ceased tolling. Sir Thomas was not in great pain, but it seemed that the hand gripping his stomach also gripped his brain and his eyes, so that the room swirled and turned, as if filled with mist. He lay for a long time swimming as it seemed in the mist, and inexplicably afraid.

Before his mind's eye, at last, stood the appearance of little Willie Hardesty, with his golden curls. The face was drained of blood. The wide, flounced collar worn at the trial had been removed, so that the slender neck was exposed, with the livid mark around it just below the chin. The large blue eyes were shut. It was a figure which Sir Thomas felt could have been checked, point by point, with something which by now must have been cut down from the gallows—something which had been a child.

So vivid was this figment of the brain, that when the silken curtains beyond the foot of the bed rustled and slowly parted, Sir Thomas caught his breath with sudden horror. At once, however, he recovered himself, and called,

"Magruder?"

It was not Magruder. The curtains parted further, and the giant figure of Calgrave entered. He wore the dark and sinister uniform of his office. He strode boldly to the foot of the bed, and looked down at its occupant.

"I am come to report to Your Lordship," he said, formally, in his deep voice.

A great weakness came over Sir Thomas.

"I am a dying man," he said, faintly.

The hangman seemed not to hear. He continued, inflexibly.

"For the first time in twenty years of office, I have to report my work only partly finished."

As the patient in the bed, whom pain was attacking once more, looked up at him without comprehension, the executioner's tone changed to one of deadly intensity. His eyes narrowed. His mouth tightened to so grim a line that the words he spoke seemed to be bitten off and hurled in the face of the quaking magistrate.

"Did it not occur to Your Lordship that the hangman might be a man? That he might not hold his office beyond all price? There is blood on my soul, Your Lordship—much blood—but I will not strangle a little child. I can't do it. The boy has been remanded back to prison, to await the hangman who shall be appointed in my place."

"He is alive?" gasped the judge.

"Yes—God help him!"

The hangman drew himself to his great

height, and waited; but Sir Thomas Thorneycraft, staring a moment with the light of a vast relief in his eyes, buried his flushed face in the pillows.

Unnoticed, Magruder had entered; as unobtrusive as the massive desk on which the pardons had been written, and as perfectly in keeping with any scene which might occur in his master's apartments. He tiptoed forward, to touch Calgrave upon the arm.

"If you will pardon me, Mr. Calgrave —Sir Philip has arrived to attend His Lordship. I have information for you, Mr. Calgrave—information which will please you greatly. You were just gone when I reached the prison, but they told me you had come here."

The hangman started, like one aroused from dreams, and slowly followed the old servant.

HALF an hour afterward, that eminent surgeon, Sir Philip Riggs, emerged from the sickroom, to find Calgrave awaiting him in the lower hall. To the question asked him, the man of science replied with a cynical smile.

"Not this time, Calgrave. Perhaps the next. Perhaps the hundredth time from now. His Lordship's stomach has marvelous assimilative powers, but some night he will eat one lobster too many. This one might have killed him—it had his injured nose and his state of mind to help it. But you brought him good news in the nick of time. He is grateful, Calgrave, I assure you. Leave him to himself now. He must sleep."

The gray breath of Father Thames swirled and eddied around the hangman of London town as he trudged off through the dawn. At times, he chuckled; which was when there recurred to him the words of the young man, Spensey, now doubtless freed, whose encounter with Sir Thomas had excited great interest in the city. He even toyed a little with one of Spensey's expressions, talking to himself as he walked:

"The majesty of England! The proud majesty of England! Saved from stain!"

And, a few steps farther down the street:

"By a bruised nose and a broiled lobster!"

Golden Blood

By JACK WILLIAMSON

A novel of weird adventures in the hidden land of Arabia, and a golden folk that ride upon a golden-yellow tiger and worship a golden snake

The Story Thus Far

DYNAMITING their schooner behind them on the south coast of Arabia, a little band of desperate adventurers plunged into the hostile mystery of the Rub' Al Khali, cruelest and least-known desert of the earth. Their leaders were Price Durand, wealthy American soldier of fortune, Jacob Garth, enigmatic Englishman, and Joao de Castro, unsavory Macanese.

Equipped with an army tank, machine-guns, and mountain artillery, and accompanied by the sheikh Fouad el Akmet and his renegade Bedouins, they raided the forbidden "golden land," which was guarded by the uncanny scientific powers of its weird rulers, the "golden folk" —a man, an exotic woman, a huge, domesticated tiger, and a gigantic snake, all four of which had been transformed, by yellow vapors rising from a volcanic fissure in a mountain where they dwelt, into eternal yellow metal, immortally alive.

Price fell in love with Aysa, a strange, lovely fugitive, and fought de Castro for her. She was abducted by Malikar, the golden man, and Price, venturing after her into the mountain, found her sleeping in the yellow mist, being herself turned into gold by Malikar, who intends to make her his unwilling consort.

Overcome by the soporific influence of the vapor, Price was captured and imprisoned by Malikar. Stark naked, he has just been dragged into the presence of the golden man, who, amazingly, is surrounded by conveniences of Western civilization. Mockingly asked to join the sinister cult of the golden snake, Price refused. In mad, hopeless fury, he has attacked Malikar without arms, ignoring the golden man's torturing whip.

The story continues:

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22. Vekyra's Guest

PRICE'S savage rage against his torturer was drowned in the blood that ran thickly down his naked body from the slashes of the whip. He realized suddenly that he was merely giving Malikar the pleasure of killing him, uselessly.

He checked his last charge at the golden man, stood motionless in the long hall, beneath the shaded electric lights that were so weirdly incongruous among the baffling wonders of this forgotten land.

Again the whip touched him, drew blood like a flashing blade; involuntarily he flinched. But he folded his arms and stood staring at Malikar.

"Enough, Mr. Durand?" the golden man mocked him.

Price bit his lip, said nothing.

Malikar gestured to the snake-men who had brought him into the room. They closed upon him—to take him back to the dank horror of the dungeon, he

This story began in WEIRD TALES for April

"Vekyra drew her arrow to the head."

knew. And he knew he was not likely to leave it again, living.

Price turned, and saw the tiger again. Colossal golden cat, elephantine in bulk, it stood in the middle of the hall. The yellow woman, Vekyra, was leaning over the side of its black *howdah,* watching Price with odd speculation in her greenish eyes.

Desperate, illogical hope came to him abruptly. He knew that the woman and Malikar were at loggerheads. He had seen their duel for the control of the golden serpent. Vekyra, he suspected, was not delighted by Malikar's passion for Aysa.

Running suddenly ahead of his guards, toward the tiger, he cried:

"Vekyra, won't you help me? Can you see me buried alive?"

It was a hopeless prayer. She had watched while Malikar plied the whip. And he had seen no pity on her oval face.

Sick from the pain of his bleeding wounds, dizzy, reeling, Price was clutching at the last, futile straw of hope.

"Oh, Vekyra, you will help me! One so beautiful——"

At the last she smiled, brightly, enigmatically. Her greenish eyes showed interest, but no pity for him.

Price's guards hesitated behind him, keeping a respectful distance from the yellow tiger. Malikar roared after them: "Take the dog on to his dungeon!"

That harsh command had the effect upon Vekyra that Price had tried for in vain. The oblique eyes flashed maliciously green. She smiled down again.

"Stranger, you are my guest," her silvery voice spoke. "Mount with me."

She darted a venomous glance at Malikar.

"The man is mine," snarled the golden priest. "If I command that he rots in the dungeon, there he rots."

"Not," Vekyra insisted with a poisoned smile, "if I take him to my palace."

"Forward!" bellowed Malikar. "Seize the man."

Timidly the blue-robes advanced.

"Touch him," Vekyra assured them sweetly, "and the tiger dines well this night."

They paused, looking fearfully back at Malikar.

The golden priest strode down across the hall, the long whip, red with Price's blood, writhing and hissing before him like a living serpent. The snake-men scattered toward the walls.

Vekyra laughed, and her laughter was chiming, silvery, mocking.

"Perhaps your whip can master the snake, O Priest," she called, "but not Zor, I think. The tiger has been mine too long."

Malikar hesitated visibly; but he came on toward Price, the whip twisting and cracking angrily before him.

Hardly able to stand, Price staggered toward the tiger. His raw wounds throbbed intolerably. Nausea and weakness almost overwhelmed him, the result of long days of hardship as much as of his present pain and loss of blood. The floor of the long hall swam and rocked, the high electric lights floated in fiery circles.

Vekyra leaned forward in the *howdah*. She whispered to the tiger; one great ear slanted back to listen.

Then the colossal golden beast advanced upon Malikar, crouching, hind legs drawn forward. It growled menacingly. The sound was a sullen roar, filling the great hall with throbbing fury.

Malikar stopped; the hissing lash dropped to the floor.

"Woman!" his voice grated, hard with hate, "you will pay for this. You think I will not whip you because you are of the golden blood?"

"I know you will not whip me—because you can not!"

"Know now that you are no longer priestess of the snake—nor can ever be again. Another has been chosen."

That other, Price knew, was Aysa.

"Of that I had learned already," the woman responded, cold wrath in her silver tones. "But perhaps I have found another to be priest of the snake and master of the golden folk. Was not Iru once as great as Malikar?"

She gestured toward Price with a slim golden arm.

"That whelp is not Iru," snarled the priest. "He *is* but a lying pretender, who rifled the king's tomb."

"And was Malikar not once a lying pretender?" the silver voice inquired acidly. And it took a note of warning: "Guard well your new priestess, Malikar, lest she fall into the pit, or perchance feed the snake, instead of worshipping it."

Again Vekyra leaned forward, calling something into the tiger's ear. The gigantic yellow beast crouched until its tawny belly touched the floor. With lithe grace the woman leapt from the *howdah*.

Running to Price's side, she slipped off the loose green cloak above her close-fitting tunic, wrapped it about his bleeding shoulders.

"Come!" she whispered urgently in his ear. "Mount, before yon slave-driver devises more evil!"

REELING uncertainly, Price turned with her toward the crouching tiger. A slim, bare yellow arm slipped about his smarting shoulders. Vekyra, amazingly strong, lifted him into the great *howdah*, where he fell back gratefully among the cushions.

Malikar ran back to his desk, hammered a great bronze gong behind it, whose screaming reverberations filled the hall with insistent clamor of alarm. Vaguely, his head spinning with pain and exhaustion, Price was aware of shouting and the clangor of arms along distant passages.

Vekyra, leaping easily into the *howdah* beside him, called again into the tiger's ear. The great beast surged to its feet with irresistible strength, with one smooth effort, far unlike the awkward lurching of a rising camel.

Vekyra shouted again, and the animal wheeled and ran from the room, the

howdah swaying upon its back like a boat grasped in a mighty current.

Behind, Malikar bellowed ominously, "Woman, you shall taste my whip for this. And the dog upon which you defile your hands shall——"

Then they were outside in a dark passage, illuminated only by occasional flaring cressets—the electric lights appeared to have been restricted to the one room. It was eight feet wide, nearly twice that high; but there was none too much room for the racing tiger.

"We must hasten," Vekyra whispered, her voice edged with alarm, "or Malikar will have the gates closed, and shut us out of my palace."

A great, yellow-fringed ear was cupped back to listen, as Vekyra called another command. The tiger surged forward more swiftly, until Price's sensations were those of sheer flying. Around a sharp corner it flung, plunged swaying up a sloping way.

Ahead, Price saw an incandescent rectangle of sky, almost blindingly blue to eyes sensitized by the surrounding gloom.

Vekyra reached down among the cushions beside her, found a short, oddly shaped metal bow. Snatching an arrow from a full quiver fastened in the corner of the *howdah*, she nocked it, sat waiting alertly.

Dark hastening figures were suddenly visible in the bright, enlarging rectangle ahead. Then it was narrowing. Shrill squealing of pulleys reached Price's ears. Great valves of yellow metal, he saw, were swiftly closing.

Vekyra drew her arrow to the head. Price heard the singing *twang* of the bow, and ahead, a sharp cry. The screech of pulleys ceased.

The tiger slipped through the space between the half-closed gates, so narrow that the *howdah's* fastenings scraped. And they burst into sunlight so bright that Price, for a time, could see nothing.

Weak and dizzy, he sank back among the cushions, drawing an arm across his eyes. Then he felt Vekyra's smooth arms slipped beneath his shoulders.

"Be ye welcome," she whispered, "to my castle of Verl. Rest, and fear nothing, for you are Vekyra's guest."

She lifted him up, and her whisper became soft, seductively caressing, as she added, extravagantly: "I am your slave."

23. The Golden Folk

For a few minutes Price lay completely relaxed, supported by Vekyra's arm, as the tiger swayed forward. Hot, blinding sunlight drenched him, strangely grateful to one unexpectedly delivered from the black dungeons of Malikar. Its penetrating force was mildly stimulating. Presently he moved to sit up, stirred by curiosity about this amazing, mountain-crowning palace.

Gorgeous wonders of Oriental gardens burst upon him. The tiger was pacing across a wide court, surrounded with walls and colonnades of refulgent gold and gleaming white marble. Dark, lush grass edged crystal pools, where white doves splashed joyously. Graceful palms flung high their emerald, tufted masses. Bright-flowering shrubs tinctured the air with cool fragrance.

About the broad court rose the gold-and-alabaster towers of Verl. Lacy balconies above vivid gardens, supported by slender, twisted columns. High, trefoil-arched windows, peering domes and slim minarets. The architecture was typically Arabic; but all was snowy marble, shining gold.

In the white dazzle of the afternoon sun the splendors of the place would have been painful, but for the cool green shadows of the gardens.

Deliberately the golden tiger carried the swaying *howdah* along a gravel path, beneath an arcade of palms. Price stared about him in silent wonder. The scene was so like his dreams of many cruel days that he felt suddenly that it must be illusion, madness, mirage.

Had his old delirium returned?

Summoning a desperate strength, he turned fiercely to the woman beside him in the *howdah*, seized a bare, golden arm, peered into her face. Her skin gleamed like pale gold; it felt somehow metallic. But it was warm and yielding beneath his fingers; he felt under it firm, vibrant muscles.

"Woman of gold," he demanded, "are you real?"

The face was strange. Oval. Exotically lovely. The color of pale gold, framed in hair of ruddy gold. The slightly slanted eyes were greenish, like the tiger's. Behind heavy golden lashes, they were enigmatic, inscrutable.

"More real than you are, Iru. For I am gold, and you are frail flesh. For I was as I am now, when Anz was living, and her people teeming millions. And I shall be as I now am when your bones are as the bones of Anz."

She smiled, and he read a baffling challenge in her eyes.

"Maybe so, old girl," Price muttered in English. "But I call your bluff, and I'll play the game."

His fighting will could keep back oblivion no longer. A sea of night flowed over him, and he sank back in Vekyra's arms.

PRICE awoke within the most magnificent—if perhaps not the most comfortable—room that he had ever occupied, huge and lofty, the broad doorway arched and silken-curtained. The marble floor was thick-strewn with rugs, deep-piled, dull-red and blue. High walls were milky alabaster, paneled with gold.

From his elaborate, canopied bed he could look through wide, unglazed windows, over the basalt walls of Verl, to the dark lava plateau half a mile below, which stretched away beyond the green mark that was the oasis of El Yerim, to tawny wastes of flat red desert beyond, to shimmering horizons smoky in hot distance.

Price was surprized by his sense of well-being, and by the fact that his whip-cuts were completely healed. Such recovery could not have taken place in one day. He guessed, and Vekyra later admitted, that he had lain for some days in oblivion induced by her healing drugs. For she, it seems, was something of a chemist and physician.

Somewhat to Price's confusion, he found six personal attendants waiting in the vast room on the day he woke. They were young women, tall, rather attractive, with the dark hair, thin lips, and aquiline noses that bespoke Arabic blood. They wore short, dark-green tunics, and each carried at her waist a long, crooked-bladed, golden *jambiyah*. On the forehead of each was the yellow brand of the snake.

They brought him white silken robes (his own garments were still in Malikar's possession), offered him food, water and wine. He tried a little to talk to them; but though they seemed pathetically eager to serve him, they avoided his questions.

Still feeling languid, without energy, he made no effort to leave the great room until late afternoon, when Vekyra came to call upon him. Her slim, pale-golden figure was cased in dark forest-green, her red-gold hair fell in a flaming cascade. The slant of her dark-lidded eyes gave a hint of mystery to her oval face.

Price rose to greet her. She saluted him as Iru, inquired about his health, and seated herself upon a cushioned sofa. The girls—Price was not yet certain whether they were servants or jailers—retired discreetly.

"One thing I must tell you," Price began, rather abruptly, anxious not to sail under false colors. "You called me Iru. I'm not. My name is Price Durand. I was born on the other side of the world."

Deliberately, the greenish, oblique eyes studied his face, his lean, muscular limbs. Price, still feeling the lassitude of convalescence, sat down opposite the golden woman.

"You are Iru, king of Anz," Vekyra said calmly, at length. "For I knew the ancient Iru well—who better? You are he. It makes no difference that you have been born again, and in a far land."

"You knew him, then?" Price asked, conversationally. He felt a keen interest in the old ruler for whom he had been several times mistaken. And he was determined not to show any awe of Vekyra.

"You have forgotten me? Then I shall tell you the story of the ancient Iru, for it is only the beginning of the same story that we are living now—you and I, and Malikar and Aysa."

At the girl's name, Price started visibly.

Vekyra smiled obliquely, murmured: "Ah, I see you remember *her*."

"I know a girl of that name," admitted Price.

He tried to make his tone impersonal, but the woman must have caught some hint of his feeling, for her oval face went suddenly hard with hate.

"Aysa, like you, is born again!" she hissed. "Again we are all four together, to finish the story that started when Anz was young."

The passion went from her golden face as quickly as it had come, and she settled her lithe, gleaming body among the cushions, and flung back the rich, glinting masses of her hair.

"When I was a girl—and not yet my blood golden—Iru was king of Anz. The people loved him, because he was handsome and strong, famous for his courage and his skill with his golden ax. And you are he!"

Price shook his head.

"You have his lean, tall figure, his blue eyes, his red hair — and those are rare indeed among our people. More, I know your face!

"Anz was great then, her people millions. The creeping drift-sands were yet far off. The rains came every winter; the lakes and reservoirs were always full, the crops and pastures plenty.

"Then there were no golden beings save the snake. The snake has lived in the mountain since before the dawn of man. It sometimes came out, through a cave, to hunt. The people of Anz thought it a god—for the strange fascination of its eyes—and built a temple to it below the mountain.

"In the time of Iru, Malikar was priest of the snake. A bold man he was, and a seeker of wisdom. As many priests do, he knew the truth about his god. He went back into the cave, and found the abyss of golden vapor, which rises from the fires of inner earth, turning all things that breathe it into deathless gold.

"The snake was but a common reptile that had made its lair within the mountain, and breathed the mist. No more god than any snake. Malikar made tests, and found the secret of the golden blood.

"Now you—or Iru—were a warrior and a hunter. You knew not the secret of the snake, but you held that it was an evil thing. You decreed that the toil and

the lives of the Beni Anz should be paid it in sacrifice no longer. You ordered the priests to leave their temple. For this Malikar hated you, and resolved to destroy you, to make his god supreme and rule as both priest and king.

"Yet another quarrel had you and the priest. I, Vekyra, as I said, was then a young woman, a princess of Anz, and not golden, as you see me now. You loved me. You said, *then,* that I was beautiful. We were betrothed to marry. And Malikar desired me also.

"Iru led his soldiers to the temple. The priests fled before his golden ax. He destroyed the temple and sealed the snake's cavern.

"Malikar fled when he saw the battle was lost, left the other priests. By a secret way he went into the mountain, and far down into the golden mist. There he slept for many days, until the golden vapor had penetrated his body, changed its tissues to strong and deathless gold.

"Now the girl Aysa was a slave. I bought her from traders of the north, for a tiring-maid. One day Iru saw her, and wanted her. Now since we were to marry, I was not pleased. I told him he might have the girl—if he would exchange for her a tamed tiger.

"While Malikar lay sleeping in the golden mist, Iru rode into the mountains and fought a tigress and brought back its cub. He tamed it and brought it to me, so I was forced to give him the slave, Aysa. But better for him had he kept his beast!"

Green, slanted eyes flamed.

"Malikar lay in the mountain until he was a man of gold. Then he led out the snake, and went among the desert clans that dwelt beyond Anz, to preach his new religion. He said he had died, and been born again—delivered of the snake, with a body of gold.

"The desert folk believed him. For was his body not golden, and so strong he let them hew it with swords? Malikar led them against Anz, the snake with him, to freeze men with the chill of its eyes.

"But you were a great warrior. You gathered the cattle and the tillers of fields inside the walls. Then you went out, with your warriors and Korlu, your ax, and scattered the desert men back into the waste.

"But Malikar and the snake you could not slay, for they were gold. You could only return to Anz, and close the gates against them.

"Then Malikar resolved to use cunning. He sent the snake back into the mountain. Painting his golden body, to make it the color of a man's—as he yet does, when he goes out into the world—he slipped back into Anz, to murder you.

"But you were surrounded by your warriors, and the great ax was always with you. Malikar could not approach you secretly.

"THEN he found a new plan. He went to Aysa, the slave. How he won her, I do not know. Perhaps with the promise of gold, which was plenty in the cave of the snake. Perhaps with fear of the snake-god. Or it may be that his kisses were enough.

"Aysa put his poison in your bowl, and you drank it with your wine. You died. But the slave gained little by her treason. Iru tasted the poison, and knew what she had done, and slew her with the ax before he fell.

"Then Malikar stood forth as the man of gold and the avenger of the snake. Leaderless, the Beni Anz bowed down before him. They sent an offering of many slaves to the snake, and Malikar ruled them, priest and king.

"With the many slaves, Malikar hewed a new temple in the heart of the mountain, down in the very mist of gold.

"When Iru was dead, Malikar took me by force into the mountain, and left me sleeping in the yellow vapor until I was gold. He would have made me his slave for ever. But the tame tiger cub, that Iru had caught for the slave-girl's sake, followed me into the mountain.

"There the sleep fell upon it, and it also woke an animal of gold. Malikar could not kill it, and it still loved me, and served me. And year by year it grew larger—perhaps because it was not grown when it slept—until even the snake fears it.

"That is the story of the golden folk."

Price sat in silent wonder. He did not believe in reincarnation; but neither did he disbelieve. He knew that hundreds of millions hold it as the basis of their religion.

Vekyra's story was interesting. It had a strange plausibility. It seemed to explain much at which he had wondered. He was willing to admit it as possibly true—all of it save that Aysa was the avatar of a murderess.

Vekyra glided up from her couch, and across the rugs to Price. She leaned on the arm of his chair, her perfumed tresses falling like a torrent of ruddy flame across his shoulders, her slim, green-clad body nearly touching him.

"That is the story, Iru. And a hundred generations I have lived in this palace of Verl that Malikar built for me, enduring a life without love that had no mercy of death—waiting for you, my Iru!

"Many times I have longed to leap into the golden abyss. But I knew that some time you would be born again, my Iru, and come back to me—even though new lands rose from the sea, and new deserts barred your way."

The golden woman slipped down beside Price, her warm body vibrant against his own. Her slim yellow arms went around him, soft and yet strong. She lifted her enigmatic, oval face, greenish eyes burning, reddened lips parted in avid invitation.

A moment he hesitated, almost shrinking from her. Then the burning promise of her swept him away. He inclined toward her, flung his arm around her slender body. Her hot lips came up to his, clinging, hungry—and their touch plunged him into white, delicious flame.

24. *Mirrors of Mirage*

WHEN Vekyra was gone, Price felt disturbed and a little guilty thinking of Aysa. But the golden woman had certainly saved his life, he reflected. A few kisses were not too much to pay.

He might have found other excuses for his moment of surrender to the golden beauty. Her good offices appeared the only possible means of Aysa's rescue—and a very doubtful means, Vekyra hating the unfortunate girl as she evidently did. Vekyra's displeasure would mean a speedy and probably permanent return to the dungeons of Malikar. But, honest with himself, Price admitted that no such consideration had occurred to him during that flaming moment in Vekyra's arms.

Next morning, when Price had breakfasted, he went for a stroll about the palace, escorted by four of his female retinue, who wore their golden *jambiyahs*. As he strode ahead of them through magnificent gardens and among gold and marble colonnades, his eye was alert for some opportunity to escape.

He had resolved to leave Verl, if that could be done. Vekyra, certainly, would not willingly or knowingly aid him in Aysa's rescue. He suspected that the golden woman had questionable designs

upon himself. But escape seemed a hopeless thing, unarmed as he was, and ceaselessly watched by the snake-branded women.

"*Effendi* Duran'!"

The hail, in a familiar voice, startled him. Turning, he saw the sheikh Fouad el Akmet approaching along an avenue of palms. The old Bedouin was unarmed, and beside him, familiarly close, tripped one of Vekyra's girls, crooked *jambiyah* at her waist.

"Peace be upon you, O sheikh," Price greeted him, and walked to meet him. "You are also the guest of Vekyra?"

The old Arab drew Price apart from the warrior-girls, and whispered through his scraggy black beard:

"*Aywa, Sidi!*" He looked cautiously at the waiting girls, with his shifty black eyes. "Three days ago the *Howeja* Jacob Garth sent me to scout toward the mountain, with my men. The evil golden woman-*djinni,* who rides the golden tiger, came upon us suddenly. Three of my men the tiger killed. And she brought me to this castle of Eblis."

The old sheikh glanced behind him again, lowered his voice further.

"But yet I may escape. The woman with me, *she* knows a *man.*" He leered fatuously. "Nazira is her name. Last night she promised to aid me. I know my way with the women, eh?"

Price grinned at the old man. Fouad whispered again:

"*Effendi,* when the time comes, will you go with me? *Bismillah!* I like not to be alone in this land of *'ifrits!*"

"Yes," Price assured him, though he was none too confident of the old Arab's ability to seduce his jailer, and still less confident that, even with the woman's aid, escape would be successful.

THE Bedouin turned away, leering familiarly at the waiting girl. Price, with his escort, moved on, amid the splendors of Verl.

Presently Vekyra overtook him, upon the tiger. She made the golden beast crouch beside him, extended a slim yellow arm.

Vekyra had exchanged her green garments for a close-fitting tunic of luminous violet, that shimmered metallically when her lithe body moved. Her ruddy hair, fastened back with a broad band of the same material, assumed a glowing brilliance against it.

"Iru," she said, "I wish you to ride with me this morn, upon the mirage."

"Upon the mirage?"

"Yes. I am the mistress of the illusion. You have seen it. A secret of ancient Anz. The old wise men mastered the laws of illusion, contrived mirrors—and other forces—to rule the mirage."

"How——"

"You shall see, in the hall of illusion."

She spoke to the tiger, and the gigantic cat, which wore neither bridle nor halter, swung rapidly away, along a magnificent colonnade of white marble and gold.

The woman arranged the cushions in the *howdah* and drew Price down beside her. The swaying of the beast threw him against her, so that he felt the lithe, warm strength of her body, caught the heavy, intoxicating perfume of her hair.

The tiger carried them into the central pile of the castle, and up a spiral ramp, that ascended, Price knew, into the great middle tower of shimmering gold. Through unglazed openings in the walls he glimpsed the white and gold wings of the building, and below, the grim, limitless sea of dark desert, blue in the haze of heat.

At last they entered a strange hall, at the very summit of the tower. From the

end of the sloping way the tiger stepped silently and cautiously out upon a vast mirror, an unbroken sheet of crystal that formed the floor.

Price gazed about in amazement at the hall of illusion. Not only its floor was crystal. The walls were mirrors, oddly shaped, strangely curved. Reflecting one another, they gave deceptive impressions of limitless vistas of mirrored halls, made it impossible to tell the actual size of the room. Half the roof was open to the turquoise sky, half a brilliant plane of flawless crystal.

A thousand times—ten thousand times—in mirror-walls and floor and ceiling, Price saw reflections of himself and Vekyra upon the tiger. Infinitely the image was repeated, sometimes looking gigantic, sometimes diminished almost to invisibility.

Vekyra reached out her hand and touched a little cluster of five tiny disks. Price had not seen them before; they seemed suspended in space beside the tiger. Actually, he realized, they projected through a sheet of crystal beside them, polished to the perfection of invisibility.

Vekyra pressed a crimson stud. Beneath, Price heard the even throb of concealed machinery. The mirrors shifted, spun; reflections swam disturbingly within them.

The thousand images of the tiger fled away astoundingly. A single level floor of blue, shimmering crystal reached out in all directions, to infinity. Away across that bright plain raced the reflections of the tiger, shrank to tiny dark points, vanished.

Only the blue light of the sky was mirrored in the crystals; Price felt oddly as if the tiger were suspended in a blue and vacant void.

Vekyra touched a green disk. The shrill whine of another hidden mechanism rose about them. The air was suddenly charged, tense. Price sniffed the pungence of ozone, knew that powerful electric forces must be discharging about them.

"Watch!" cried Vekyra. "The bending of light, the birth of illusion!"

Price saw black points come into the mirrors, where their reflection had vanished; saw the points expand into dark lines of far horizons; scraps of distant desert, swimming swiftly nearer, so that he saw first blue haze above, then undulating ranks of yellow-red dunes; queer patches of desert; snatches of sand and sapphire sky. All mingled fantastically in a crazy-quilt of illusion, swiftly expanding, rushing nearer.

Abruptly, it all took form. The scraps of desert merged into a whole. Seemingly hundreds of feet below, a heavy slope of loose sand reared its barren yellow-red crest. Away to hot, shimmering world-rims rolled crescent dunes.

The illusion was incredibly real.

Price could see his own body, the golden woman beside him in the cushioned *howdah* . . . and far below, the sand-desert. The mountain, the dark surrounding lava flows, had vanished.

Vekyra smiled at him, as if in malicious delight at his amazement, and pressed a yellow disk. Then, though Price, of course, had no sensation of physical motion, the desert seemed to race beneath them. Vast, sun-glinting salt-pans flashed beneath, like snow-clad lakes. Yellow outcroppings of limestone. Barren plains of flint and clay. Black lava fields.

Price reached out an exploring hand toward the clustered disks. Where his eyes saw only empty air, his fingers met polished crystal. A queer, tingling shock made his arm jerk back involuntarily.

"Beware," warned Vekyra. "All the tower is charged with the power that bends down the light. And you are not immortal—*yet.*"

She touched a green stud. And Price, looking over the *howdah's* edge again, saw that they seemed to hang motionless over the oasis of El Yerim.

A broad streak, green with date-palms and fields of green, across dark lava plains. The tiny, green-rimmed lake. The square, clustered mud houses of the town. Across the lake, the camp of his recent allies.

White tents, grouped along the shore. The gray bulk of the tank—Sam Sorrows had got back safely. Supplies stacked, tarpaulin-covered. The black tents of Fouad's Bedouins, the herds of camels.

And two surprizing things. One was a set of glistening, parallel wires strung upon poles cut from palm trunks—an unmistakable radio antenna. The other was a smooth, cleared field on the gravel beyond the camp, with two airplanes squatting upon it. Trim, gray-winged military biplanes, machine-guns frowning grimly above their cockpits, light aerial bombs in their racks. Beside the fuselage of one of them he saw Jacob Garth, unmistakable in his faded khaki and white *topi,* staring up at them.

For a moment Price was dumfounded. Then the explanation of it burst upon him. Garth had insisted, rather strangely, upon bringing no airplanes with them, his only excuse being the difficulty of landing in the sand-desert.

But he must have secretly arranged for the planes, left them in the hands of unsuspected allies. He had smuggled a portable radio transmitter in with the supplies, unknown to the rest of the party. The landing-field prepared, he had sent directions to the planes by wireless.

Now Price understood why Garth had been so ready to dynamite the schooner. With the planes, it was useless to him. Also, Price better understood Malikar's desire for his own aid against the treasure-seekers.

"Those are devices of war?" asked Vekyra, pointing to the planes.

"Yes. Men fly in them—to battle."

"You think they will again attack this mountain?"

"I'm sure they will. Jacob Garth isn't the sort to give up."

"Jacob Garth? He was your leader?"

"Not mine. But now he commands."

"Do you see him?"

"The large man, by that machine." Price pointed.

Vekyra studied him intently, nodded. "That is what I wished to know."

Her slim yellow arm reached from the *howdah,* touched the center disk.

The vibrant whine of hidden mechanisms, which Price had forgotten in his interest at what he saw, abruptly died. The scene below was shattered into a thousand fragments; into torn reflections in a thousand mirrors.

The shattered shards of images fled away. A moment the mirrors were blank, shimmering with the ultramarine brilliance of the sky. Then a thousand black dots were in them. Specks that swelled, rushed nearer, expanded into pictures of the tiger and its riders.

Softly the tiger padded across the floor of crystal, out of the hall of illusion.

25. The Crown of Anz

NEXT morning Price rose at dawn, to find three of his six female servants—or guards—waiting in his great, splendid room. They brought him breakfast; and, when he had eaten, and strolled out of the apartment, they followed him discreetly, keeping ten yards behind.

Again he roved the vast building in the hope of some discovery that would lead to a means of escape. Now that Jacob Garth had the airplanes, he would surely attack the mountain again, and with some chance of success. Price longed poignantly for freedom to rejoin him and attempt Aysa's succor once more.

Two hours he roamed about the castle. The three girls, with their yellow *jambiyahs*, kept close behind him. And the wall of gigantic basalt blocks that skirted the flat mountain-top was forty feet high, guarded by other armed women in its studding towers. It appeared heart-breakingly impossible to leave Verl without Vekyra's permission.

Again, on the way back to his room, he met the sheikh Fouad el Akmet, walking intimately beside the yellow-branded girl.

Fouad nodded at her, and winked elaborately at Price. Brushing close as he passed, he whispered:

"Be at the east side of the central court, *Effendi,* at midnight."

The girl was beside him as he spoke; he ogled her, nudged her familiarly in the side. She smiled slyly back at him.

"You will be there, *Sidi?*"

Price nodded, and the old Bedouin grimaced craftily through his beard.

The girl, he more than suspected, was about to make a fool of the old Arab. And even if she were sincere, Price could not see how an escape was to be contrived. Surely not through the passages in the mountain, guarded by Malikar and his snake-men. And Price had seen no way to negotiate the half-mile precipices outside the walls. But he resolved to meet the old man—if he could get free of his own guards. No reason why he should not. And there was a chance. . . .

Vekyra came to his room that evening, a female slave behind her carrying the garments that Malikar had taken from him, and the oval golden buckler, the chain-mail, and the great ax that had been Iru's.

"These I made Malikar give me," she explained. "Do you wish to keep the ax?"

"Why, yes," Price said, puzzled, astonished, and delighted at this unexpected return of his possessions.

"Then promise me not to use it in Verl."

"I promise."

"The word of Iru is strong as the walls of Anz," she said. Then, smiling at him provocatively: "Iru, I would have you dine with me at sunset. The slaves will bring your garments."

And soon, declining the proffered aid of the armed girls, Price was donning a barbarically splendid outfit. *Kamis* of pure white silk, diaphanously thin. *Abba* of stiff, woven silver, lined with crimson silk, bordered with brilliant red. Something extraordinary, he thought, must be imminent.

When he was ready, the girls led him out of the room, and down a long arcade whose twisted columns were alternately marble and gold, and into a long hall he had not seen before.

The high walls of burnished gold were inset with broad panels of snowy alabaster, embellished with weird designs in black and crimson. On the walls flared silvery cressets, green and violet.

DAY was already fading and the colored lights were dim; mysterious shadows lurked in the long hall. The air was surprizingly and deliciously cool; it bore a pungent hint of unfamiliar fragrance, as if incense were burning in the cressets.

The armed girls stopped at the curtained entrance. Price walked alone across

the soft rugs to where Vekyra waited. For a moment he was self-conscious in the unfamiliar garments; the silver cloak felt stiff and heavy.

Two couches had been set in the farther end of the hall, broad and low, of some dark, antique wood, crimson-lacquered. Upon one Vekyra was reclining upon luxurious deep cushions. With feline grace she rose and came to meet Price and took his hands.

The sheath of scarlet about her pale-gold body made it almost white. A wide band of black about her head emphasized the ruddy splendor of her rebellious hair. She wore no jewels; her dress was richly simple. Perilous lights flamed in her Oriental eyes.

Silently she led him to one of the couches, and tried to pull him down beside her upon it. He drew quickly away, and seated himself opposite.

Angrily, she tossed her head.

"Listen, Vekyra," Price began abruptly. "I don't want to quarrel with you. But I want you to understand that I'm not trying to finish any old love story that started two thousand years ago. What I want——"

Imperiously she gestured with a slim, bare arm that was almost white against her crimson tunic, demanding, "Am I not beautiful?"

He looked at her. Slenderly curved and graceful, cased in scarlet silk, she was beautiful. But her beauty was bright and cruel and terrible. "You are," he admitted.

"What do you want, Iru," she whispered, "that I can not give you?"

"See here, Vekyra, you don't understand——"

She cut him off with a petulant nod.

"What is it," she demanded in a voice that was soft, yet fierce, "that all men want the most? Love? Youth? Wealth? Power? Fame? Wisdom? Iru, I offer you not one, but all!"

"Oh, but don't you see——"

She shrugged impatient shoulders.

"You say I am beautiful. I give you a love that has lived through a hundred generations. A love that has brought you back from death, by its sheer living strength!"

Price started to speak, but saw that anything he said would only anger her. He listened in silence.

"Youth?" her silvery voice pealed the question. "When you and I are of the golden blood, you shall be young for ever. A few days in the yellow vapor—and your youth is immortal!"

Her slanted eyes burned as she pleaded with strange eloquence.

"Wealth? Look around you. My castle is yours for the taking, and all the gold in the lair of the snake. Is that nothing?

"Fame? It is yours for the seeking, when you become the strongest of men, the wealthiest, and immortal.

"Wisdom? Care you nothing for the ancient secrets of Anz? I have the books of the wise men. The hall of illusion. The mirrors of cold. Many others. You spurn wisdom?"

"See here——" Price spoke again, and again she would not listen.

"And yet I offer you more. The thing men prize above all else. The thing they gladly trade all else for. What is that?

"Power! I give you the weapons of the ancient land. The command of the tiger, and the snake. Power to conquer all the world!"

She angrily clapped her small hands, and a slave-girl came into the room, carrying a red silken cushion upon which rested a crown of white metal, crusted with seed pearls, and set with large, primitively cut, red and yellow gems.

"The crown of Anz!" cried Vekyra. "It is yours, Iru. Once you wore it. I give it back to you."

She took the crown in her hands; the girl vanished silently.

Price gestured gravely. "I'm sorry, Vekyra, but you'll have to listen to reason. I don't say you aren't beautiful, for you are. And I understand you are offering me quite a lot. Probably some men would be glad enough to take you up."

She drew angrily erect, the coronet in her hands. Price waved her back to the couch.

"You might as well know the truth, even if it hurts. I love Aysa—no matter if you do say she is the reincarnation of a murderess. And I'm going to take her away from Malikar if it takes the rest of my life.

"If she is still human, well and good. And if she is already changed to gold, *then* will be time enough for me to think about going to sleep in that mist, myself.

"Sorry if it hurts. But it's better for you to know."

Vekyra had listened silently, breast heaving, tawny eyes flashing. She started to her feet again, and then sat back down. Anger vanished from her face, like a discarded mask. She smiled obliquely at Price, with disarming, perilous sweetness.

"Iru, my lord," came her tinkling, honeyed tones, "let us not quarrel. The feast is ready."

Again she clapped, and serving-girls came through the curtained door. The platters they bore carried an astonishing variety of foods. Fresh dates. Scarlet, stoneless pomegranates. Huge purple grapes in clusters. Tiny, fragrant, hulled nuts, unfamiliar to Price. Roast meat. Spiced sweet-cakes, of many shapes and flavors. Several varieties of cheese. A diversity of wines, in tall flagons, thin and sirupy-thick, sweet and sour, red and white and purple.

Price watched Vekyra, saw that she made a mere pretense of eating. She selected some morsel from each proffered platter; but those morsels seldom went to her mouth, she no more than sipped the wine. He wondered if she required ordinary food. Perhaps the golden beings needed only to breathe the yellow mist in order to live.

He resolved to eat and drink as sparingly as Vekyra. An intuitive feeling warned him that some crisis was approaching; he determined not to drug himself with food. Like her, he merely sipped and tasted, until the platters came no more.

He saw annoyed vexation in Vekyra's eyes, and was glad of his abstinence.

"Let us have music," she whispered, at length, and clapped again.

Soft strains welled up from hidden players, unfamiliar, oddly stirring. Low, dull, insistent, barbaric as jungle tom-toms.

"Now that you have dined"—and the tawny, oblique eyes darted Price a malicious glance—"I shall dance for you."

SHE glided out upon a rug of dull blue and somber crimson and stopped there, swaying through the slow measures of an archaic dance. Through golden lashes her slanted eyes watched Price, mystic, enigmatic.

He forced his gaze away for a moment, tried to get a grip upon himself. He felt that a spell of evil was being deliberately woven about him.

It all seemed a play staged to influence him. The long, strange hall, dim in the colored, eldritch light of flaring cressets, filled with heady perfume. The weird, sobbing music, and Vekyra dancing, slim

and elfish in her crimson tunic, red-golden hair loose like a net to snare him.

She began to sing a strange, simple song:

Red flames dance, jungle flames—dance and call.
Drums throb deep, jungle drums—throb and call.
Moon glows white, jungle moon—glows and calls.

Swift heart throbs, heart of mine—throbs like drum.
Hot blood flows, blood of mine—flows like flame.
Passion glows, in my breast—glows like moon.

Moon grows dim; red flames sink; drum is still.
Yet I wait—ever wait—for my love.
Ages pass; earth grows old—still I wait.

Violet and green, the cressets flared, casting fantastic shadows upon gold and marble walls. Mysterious gloom filled the corners of the hall, and low music wailed, as Vekyra writhed and swayed and sang. The cool incense in the air was like a wine, intoxicating.

The music quickened suddenly. Vekyra spun with it, light and graceful as a dancing flame. And as she danced she stripped the crimson tunic from her bright and splendid body, flung it down and whirled over it.

The music died to far-off, haunting strains, and she came toward Price. Nearly nude. Like a statue in pale gold, come to life and walking. Her tawny-greenish eyes were hot with passion.

She flung herself down beside Price, threw her bare arms around him. Desire rose in him instantly, like a burning wind. Involuntarily, he slipped an arm around her delicately molded shoulders, drew her throbbing body to him. She lifted a pale, oval face, oblique eyes wild, aflame with passionate exultation.

Price stared for a moment into her mad, greenish eyes, and felt a sudden horror of her. He turned his face away from her seeking lips, tried to push her from him. Her bare yellow arms clung to him with amazing strength. She drew him against her body, and called out.

A slave-girl ran into the room with a crystal bowl of purple wine.

"Drink, Lord Iru," Vekyra whispered, as Price struggled in her golden arms. "Drink and forget."

She clung to him, and the girl forced the wine against his lips.

He did not want to strike a woman . . . but she was not a woman, this golden vampire.

Snatching one arm free, he knocked the wine to the floor, where it spread like blood. Vekyra still clung to him, and he drove his fist at her painted lips.

She flung him back at the couch, and hell was in her eyes.

"You strike Vekyra?" she hissed. "Me? Vekyra? Queen of Anz and priestess of the snake?"

Price scrambled to his feet and strode toward the curtained entrance.

"Go!" she flared at him. "And ask no mercy of Vekyra, for yourself—or the wretched slave you love!"

Deliberately, Price paced the length of the hall. He was almost at the curtained entrance when Vekyra called after him:

"Iru! Stay, Lord Iru!"

He looked back, saw her running after him across the rich rugs, pale and beautiful in the dim, flaring lights of green and violet. He dropped the curtain, heard beyond it her choked cry of rage and hate.

As he hastened along the splendid arcade to his own apartment in the moonlit palace, Price quoted uncomfortably:

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned!"

26. *Vekyra's Vengeance*

EVEN then, Price was far from understanding the subtlety of Vekyra's nature. As he strode back to his room, escorted by the armed girls, and exchanged

the resplendent ceremonial garments for his own clothing, which she had returned, he was expecting her destroying fury to fall upon him at any instant. He was certain that the infuriated woman would seek some revenge, but he failed to anticipate its nature.

The girls, with their *jambiyahs,* had retired to the doorway of his room. The change of clothing completed, he donned the linked yellow mail of Iru, and lay down on the bed with the ancient king's oval buckler and the golden ax beside him.

He did not sleep. At any instant he expected something to happen. Just what course Vekyra's revenge would take, he did not know. Would she come herself to murder him? Send the tiger in after him? Or merely return him to Malikar?

A full moon was shining, but the broad, unglazed windows of his room faced southwest; the silvery light did not enter them. The guards in the doorway had a torch, but it flickered low, presently hissed and went out. Price listened to the girls. They talked, for a time, in low tones. Then their voices ceased. He heard deep breathing, as if some of them were sleeping.

Abruptly, he remembered his promise to meet the old sheikh at midnight, in the middle court. He had no great hope that anything would come of it. But at any rate it would be an interesting way to pass a few hours of the night. And if he *could* get outside the castle, free to use the golden ax again . . .

The girls in the doorway did not stir as he rose silently from the bed and crossed the dark room to the unglazed windows. Softly he glided over the sill, let himself down by his arms, and dropped quietly upon the gravel walk. There was no alarm; it was amazingly simple.

The castle was strangely bright. Moonlight reverberated from bright marble and polished gold. It filled the courts and colonnades with silent, ghostly splendor.

A man could not have hidden easily in that moonlight. But there seemed to be no one about. Price slipped along sleeping paths, until he reached the middle court. That, too, was empty, uncannily still in moon-drenched wonder.

He felt almost foolish for coming here at all; it was ridiculous to trust in the old Bedouin *nakhawilah* to plan his escape. Price was uncertain whether to return to his room or to make a suicidal attempt to scale the castle walls and climb down the precipices.

"You, *Effendi?*" whispered Fouad, from the shadows of a mass of shrubbery.

Price moved toward him. The old Arab came into the moonlight. He was armed with a long javelin. The woman who had been his guard was beside him, *jambiyah* at her waist and a coil of rope on her arm.

"*Wallah, Sidi,*" muttered the sheikh. "I am glad you came! A bad place this is, by moonlight. I like not the golden woman-*djinni.*"

"Come now, silently," murmured the girl.

She led the way along a shadowed arcade of palms to the eastern wall of the castle. Hanging down the basalt barrier was a rope ladder, just to northward of one of the towers that studded the wall.

"Up that," the girl whispered. "Make no sound. Wait in the shadow of the tower."

Price climbed up, Fouad after him. The girl followed, carrying her rope. They stood on the top of the wall, six feet wide. On one side was Verl, argent, glorious in the moonlight; on the other, a half-mile of sheer space, above lava plains that were grim desolation.

The girl fastened the end of her rope to the metal hooks that held the rope ladder, then dropped it over the outer face of the wall.

"Slip down, quickly," she hissed. "You will find a path, cut in the rock. No noise. And quickly, before the mistress wakes."

Fouad advanced upon the girl, as if to embrace her. She shrugged impatiently, pushed him toward the rope. He seized it, vanished over the wall. Price waited until it went slack.

He was troubled. This escape seemed too easy. Something was wrong, but just what, he could not guess.

He followed down the rope, letting it slip through his hands. Fouad's hands reached up and caught him, guided him to a narrow ledge. He released the rope. It was whisked swiftly upward.

The ledge sloped downward, to the right, a path two feet wide, cut in the rock. It was smooth; the granite projected out above it. Price hastened away along it, Fouad following.

Still he was worried about the escape. It had been too simple. But on one point he was relieved. He was outside the castle. His promise no longer held him from using the golden ax.

THE path zigzagged back and forth across the east face of the mountain. Above a steep, smooth slope, they came to the end of it, and half climbed, half slid down to the lava plain.

Side by side, they ran away from the mountain.

"Wallah, Effendi," gasped Fouad. "We'll be in El Yerim by dawn."

When they were a mile away, Price looked back. The black mass of the mountain loomed behind them, grim and threatening. He saw the yellow square of the gates where he had once vainly demanded admission. Far above loomed the castle, a glowing opalescent coronal under the moon.

They went on, running. Price was afraid. Still he did not understand the escape. Something about it was not as it should be.

"Ya Allah!" Fouad screamed suddenly, when they were perhaps two miles across the lava flows, in the direction of the oasis. His voice was strained and distorted with fear.

He was looking back. Price turned, and scanned the ominous black pile of the mountain, across moon-flooded desert. The golden square had vanished. The tunnel-gates were open!

Then he saw the tiger, a golden monster, running across the lava fields, the *howdah* on its back. Already it had come half a mile. He could make out Vekyra's tiny figure upon the swaying beast.

He knew, then, why the escape had been so simple and easy. And he understood the subtle horror of Vekyra's vengeance. All this was her planning. A trap! Fouad had not impressed his jailer as much as he supposed; no wonder she had been impatient to start him down the rope.

All this had been planned, even before he had won Vekyra's wrath. She had spared him, for the moment, because she had the subtle snare of revenge already set and baited.

"Ya Allah! Ya gharati! [Oh God! Oh, my calamity!]" Fouad was howling. "The *djinni* but tricks us to hunt us again!"

His voice went hoarse and died in his beard. Over the desert, through the still golden rain of moonlight, wailed the ululant squall of the hunting tiger.

The startling denouement of this story will be told in the unforgettable chapters which bring this tale to an end in next month's WEIRD TALES, on sale September 1st.

The Owl

By F. A. M. WEBSTER

"God! if they should blind him!"

A shivery story of one who had delved into forbidden magic and hidden lore—a tale of occult evil

ALISON MERCER was one of the loveliest creatures ever created by the good God. In her case, moreover, beauty was more than merely skin-deep. One came to gasp at the sheer loveliness of her pale face, and the perfect proportions of her slim body, but stayed to wonder, as the days went by, and one came to realize the greater beauties of her stainless soul.

What a girl she was! Pure gold clean through, body and soul alike, all white-hot youth and innocence, unafraid and utterly unsoilable. That was Alison Mercer.

And, because she was what she was, her friends turned up their eyes in horror when they heard of her engagement to Simeon Stroud.

Why did she accept his proposal of marriage? You'll have to ask her father about that. You see, no one knows what

passed between old Tom Mercer and Alison, that time she came back from a ski-ing holiday in Scandinavia. All Alison saw was that the old man had aged greatly in less than thirty days, and her deep, sea-green eyes went wide with worry.

"Daddy, *darling,*" she expostulated, "you've been gambling again!"

"Nothing much, m'dear—bit of a flutter," mumbled old Tom uncomfortably. "At least, that's what it looked like at first. Hell! How was I to know the durned stock was going to drop twenty points in twenty-four hours?" he exploded. "A fellow gave me a sure tip, I tell you. I can't explain how the certainty came unstuck. All I know is that the chap who landed me in the cart is willing to do the right thing by me. He's awfully anxious to meet you, Alison!"

"Is he, Daddy? Well, I'll try to be extra nice to him, if he's going to help you out of your troubles."

Tom Mercer shot a queer, sidelong look at his daughter, and his eyes were very anxious.

"You'll find Stroud a sound sort of fellow," he suggested.

"What is he, Daddy, a financier, or a company promoter?"

"Neither, my dear. He's by way of being a famous archeologist and is a great authority on ancient American civilizations. He's only just back from a big exploration in Mexico. I thought he'd know what he was talking about, or I shouldn't have put money into Chilean nitrates."

"Ugh," shuddered the girl, "those old Aztecs worshipped birds and wore cloaks of feathers. I can't bear birds, so I hope we'll be able to keep him off that subject."

Strangely enough, Alison's first impression of Simeon Stroud, when he came to Horley Grange and was presented by her father, awakened in her mind all the horrors of her secret, pet obsession. Some people can't stay in the same room with a cat; others can't stand the sight of snakes or spiders. Alison Mercer couldn't abide the touch of a bird, and once, when a girl friend had caught a sparrow and placed it, fluttering, in Alison's hand, she had fainted clean away. She loved all God's creatures —don't let there be any mistake about that—but there was something about the smoothness of a bird's breast and the palpitation of a bird's wings that made her physically sick.

And Simeon Stroud was like a bird—not a decent daylight warbler, but some beastly nocturnal fowl, that flew on silent wings and peered in through sleeping people's windows, with horrible, luminous eyes. Such night-fowls live on flesh. But there was nothing predatory about Simeon Stroud's appearance. On the other hand, one gathered the impression that this little man was abnormally wise; but one felt, also, that his knowledge was abysmally evil. Further than that he had a quick way of turning his head sharply from side to side, and of shooting furtive, inquiring glances all over the place, while he spoke in a queer, twittering voice. His nose, set between wide, staring eyes, descended almost straight from below his forehead and ended in a sharp, under-turned point. A soft, fluffy fringe of hair, which encircled his face from one ear to the other, did not improve his appearance.

IT TOOK a long time for Alison to become accustomed to Stroud, but he called often at the Grange and she found that in spite of his unusual looks he could be a pleasant companion. And he was by no means a fool. He sensed that the girl had no great liking for him, and, in hunting parlance, he was careful not to rush his fences.

As the weeks went by the girl grew more and more friendly with him. Old Tom Mercer watched the progress of the romance with pleasure. Stroud would be an exceedingly useful son-in-law, and he reflected ruefully that his last flutter had been little short of disastrous.

It must not be thought that Alison was in love with Stroud, but her first feeling of revulsion had died away. Stroud was a past master in the art of working on people's feelings, and for the moment she really thought she liked him. Besides, there was her father to consider. She knew his failings well enough, she knew that he was hard-pressed financially, and she was alive to the fact that Stroud would certainly help his father-in-law out of his present difficulties. And she loved her father. That was the deciding factor. After several weeks had passed she thought that, taking everything into consideration, she could live happily with Stroud; and, anyway, marriage was always a gamble. But she failed to include in her calculations the way in which Stroud had used his smooth, persuasive tongue.

Most people in Horley referred to the newly engaged couple as "Beauty and the Beast," but there was one knowledgeable student of mythology who likened them, artfully enough, to Pallas Athene and her owl.

Alison feared a scene when a light-hearted friend disclosed the nature of their latest nickname, for she knew the violence of her fiancé's temper. But, far from being displeased, Stroud positively preened himself, smiling oddly all the time, and finally gave himself a quick shake, for all the world like a bird ruffling up its feathers to get the dust out of them.

"After all," he said quietly, "Pallas Athene was one of the most beautiful and virtuous of the goddesses of ancient Greece, and it is generally conceded that the owl is the wisest of birds."

"Well, let's hope you won't develop its nocturnal habits, after you are married, Mr. Stroud," teased the irresponsible visitor.

When they were alone that evening, Alison looked long and thoughtfully at her future husband. He had evidently found that the cap, supplied by the nickname, was a good fit, and was well content to wear it. He really was rather like an owl, she told herself, and, for the first time, out there in the half-dark of the veranda, she noted the queer, luminous quality of his tawny-gold eyes. Then, as she continued to study him, she saw that the tops of his ears were Puckishly pointed.

An involuntary shiver ran through her, but she allowed no sign of distress to escape her when he rose presently and came to kiss her good-night. When she was alone, however, her head dropped to her folded arms and her slim shoulders heaved spasmodically. They were to be married soon, and after that there would be no blessed hours of darkness and peace and solitude to follow after that detested evening embrace. She would be the property of Simeon Stroud, body and soul, and again she shuddered at the thought; for during the last few days she began to realize that she was not so confident of the future. There broke from her lips a pitiful little cry, "I am doing it all for you, Daddy; I am doing it all for you!"

A WEEK before Alison's wedding was due to take place, Hugh Davenant arrived home in England. He went straight from the boat to stay with his married sister at Exton, a small village a couple of miles beyond Horley. Next

morning he drove into the town to make some much-needed additions to his wardrobe, for he had worn nothing but the thinnest of garments in the American tropics, and such European suits as he had brought home with him had been purchased ready-made, and were appallingly badly cut. He had something to tell his sister upon his return at lunchtime.

"They say that the world's a small place," he announced, as he unfolded his dinner napkin, "and I'm beginning to believe it."

"Did you run across a pal in Horley, Hugh?" inquired Lambert, his brother-in-law.

"God forbid that I should ever call Simeon Stroud a pal of mine," Davenant answered piously.

"So you know our local 'lion', do you, dear?" queried his sister. "He settled among us about twelve months ago. You'll meet his future wife this afternoon. She's coming over for tennis."

Hugh put down his knife and fork hurriedly, and there was a look of real concern on his clear-cut, handsome features.

"Do you mean to say that *that* man is going to be married?" he queried.

"Yes, dear, and to a most charming girl. But why do you ask? He's supposed to be tremendously rich."

"Listen, Claudia," said Hugh, "Simeon Stroud may be as rich as Crœsus, for all I know. That doesn't alter the fact that he's a most unutterable swine. The Mexican Indians could tell you queer tales of his cruelties. But, apart from that, I happen to know that he got mixed up with the followers of some horrible, filthy sect out in Mexico, people who claim to be descendants of the old Aztec priests. Between them they tried to revive some ancient form of bird-worship; but, when it came to a question of permitting the sacrifice of young girls to a heathen deity, even a corrupt government stuck in its toes, and wouldn't stand for that sort of thing."

"My Lord! Some one ought to warn Alison's father," broke in Lambert.

"I think you'd find it a pretty thankless task," responded his wife. "Most people imagine that Tom Mercer has sold Beauty to the Beast."

"That's bad," commented Davenant. "Is she a nice sort of girl?"

A slow smile spread over Claudia Lambert's features. "You just wait until you see her, my lad," she answered.

When Alison arrived at the Lamberts' place that afternoon, the party was in full swing and Hugh was giving an amazing display of agility on the tennis court.

The girl stood quite still, and her breath ceased for an instant, as she caught sight of the players; for that lean, bronzed man who bounded agilely about the court, with wonderful athletic ease, provided the very beau ideal of all her dreams; and she knew, instinctively, that his hand was of the right size to hold her heart.

"I wonder whether you are admiring my brother's superabundant energy, or his personal appearance most?" said Claudia softly, and Alison came out of her revery with a self-conscious start.

"He's rather a dear," went on Claudia, "and his fitness is perfectly amazing; for he was very badly gassed, to say nothing of being buried alive, when a land mine was blown up, during the war. By the way, Alison, he's just come home from the part of Mexico where Mr. Stroud made all his discoveries. So you'll have something in common to start with, when I introduce him to you presently."

It was not, however, of Mexico that Hugh talked to Alison, when Claudia

presented him at the conclusion of the set. In point of fact he seemed, rather, to go out of his way to avoid touching upon that particular topic. When Alison asked him, point-blank, if he knew her fiancée, he replied shortly that he had met him.

AFTER that first meeting the affair developed with amazing rapidity. If one believed in the existence of such mysterious affinities as "soul-mates," one would have said that Alison Mercer had found hers, with her first sight of Hugh Davenant, playing tennis, like a lambent flame, on the Lamberts' court. She fell head over heels in love with him right away. And because this was so, and because she was intensely loyal to her father and to the promise she had given to Simeon Stroud, she seemed, to Hugh, inexplicably cold at their next meeting.

It was the day after the Lamberts' party, and Hugh had induced his sister to take him to call at Horley Grange, because he intended dropping a hint of warning in old Tom Mercer's ear. It wasn't an easy task to perform, for Alison's father was most mysteriously "in funds;" wherefore, from that old reprobate's point of view, "everything was for the best, in this best of all possible worlds."

None-the-less, Hugh knew a great deal more about the activities in Mexico of Simeon Stroud than he had let fall at his sister's luncheon table. He had heard tales of a temple, hidden away in the secret heart of the forest, where men made human sacrifice to a bird which, even allowing for the extravagance of native legends, must be something quite abnormal in the avian world. Once, on a hunting expedition, in that same forest, he had found the body of a young girl, frightfully and filthily mutilated, and with the eyes pecked out. On another occasion he had met a newly blinded man who ran screaming through the trees, with blood streaming from features which had been torn to ribbons by rending talons.

These things he had seen with his own eyes. And men said that it was Simeon Stroud, who had discovered the secrets of long-dead Aztec priests, selling his soul in exchange for those secrets, who had revived the awful rites attendant upon the worship of the Great Bird.

Tom Mercer laughed, but took no offense, when his young visitor hinted that he should, as a father, make further inquiries before permitting his daughter's marriage to take place.

"You're a sly dog, Davenant," he chuckled, "and Alison is a wonderfully desirable girl, but I'm afraid you're a bit too late in the field. We are under great obligations to Simeon Stroud."

They had been pacing the terrace of Horley Grange as they talked, but now Hugh Davenant stopped suddenly in midstride.

Was he in love with this glorious girl who had come so suddenly into his life? Pity? Ah yes! He had pitied her from the bottom of his heart, ever since he had heard that she was destined to marry Simeon Stroud. But, even though pity is so close to love, as hate is akin to fear, the notion of loving her, himself, had never entered his head, until Tom Mercer had made his covert suggestion.

THEN, as they stood there, the girl came round the corner of the house and the man knew, recognizing the finger of Fate as clearly as the girl had done yesterday, when she had seen him for the first time upon the Lamberts' tennis court, he loved Alison Mercer with all his soul.

The wonder and the glory of the revelation held him, however, for but the

briefest instant. There was something wofully amiss with the present situation. Why were Alison's cheeks wet with tears? What could have happened to bring to her eyes, which normally reflected nothing but the serenity of her soul, that look of sheer, naked terror that now informed them? Why was she trembling, and why came and went her breath in little frightened gasps?

Behind her stood Simeon Stroud, who might have answered all those questions.

At the sight of her parent, the last shreds of a tremendous determination, which had sustained her, deserted Alison Mercer. With a little stifled cry, half tears, half laughter, she ran to her father, drawing his protecting arms closely about her body and hiding her face upon his breast.

"Why, my precious, why now, what's amiss?" he soothed her, and his voice was wonderfully tender.

"Oh, Daddy, it was awful, awful!" sobbed the girl. "We were watching the sunset, Simeon and I, and, although the light has not yet gone, a great white owl came flying silently out of the woods and settled on my shoulder. It was an owl, and yet it was different from any owl I have ever seen, and, oh Daddy, it was utterly evil!"

"There, there, little one, come along to old Nannie; she'll stay with you while you lie down for a bit. Simeon, will you look after Davenant? I'll be coming back with a shotgun shortly, for I'm not too fond of owls myself."

"I am sorry," Stroud answered, "but I have an important letter to write before the mail leaves. Perhaps Mr. Davenant will excuse me?"

When Mercer returned to the terrace a few minutes later he carried a loaded gun tucked under his arm, and his face was very grave.

"Davenant, my boy," he volunteered, "I'm a bluff, John Bull sort of chap, without much imagination, probably, but I'm damned if I like this business!"

"Miss Mercer has told you what really happened, then?" Hugh asked sharply.

"Yes, it appears that Stroud got a bit amorous, round there at the back of the house. Alison swears that when she refused to allow him to kiss her in full view of the windows of the servants' quarters, he lost his temper and uttered a most peculiar cry. Whereupon, or so she says, that great owl that scared her so badly came winging up from the woods. It may be only her imagination, of course, but she declares that the bird flew straight for her eyes, and only settled on her shoulder at a word from Stroud. I suppose you don't think there is anything in all this business?"

Hugh did not reply. For long moments he remained, leaning against the balustrade, while he puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. Then he, in his turn, asked a question.

"One hates to work on hearsay, Mr. Mercer," he stated apologetically, "but local gossip has it that Stroud has got you under his thumb. You can tell me to mind my own business if you like, of course; but, frankly, just how deeply are you in his debt?"

"I owe him £20,000."

"Was the advance made *after* he became engaged to your daughter?"

"Yes," said Mercer, speaking very low, and the red color which flushed his face was no reflection of the setting sun.

Hugh dropped a kindly hand upon the old fellow's shoulder. "Transfer your debt to me," he said. "I don't pretend to be a millionaire, but I'd pay a good deal more than the money you owe Simeon Stroud to secure your daughter's happiness."

Tom Mercer looked this sudden savior in the eyes with startled delight. "Why, yes," he breathed, "that would be one way of setting Alison free, wouldn't it?"

The girl herself reacted strangely to the news of her release from the hateful engagement, to which she had committed herself for her father's sake. Old Tom, who insisted upon acquainting her with the glad tidings, just as if her salvation was entirely of his own devising, wished to save her the painful task of giving her fiancé his congé in person. But to this plan she would not consent.

"No, Daddy," she said firmly, "we're treating Simeon pretty badly, anyway. The least I can do, in common decency, is to see him and tell him how sorry I am if the breaking-off of our engagement should cause him any pain."

"Spoken like my own brave little girl," said her father heartily. "But at least you must let me be present at the interview."

Alison smiled as she shook her head, but she was neither smiling nor feeling particularly courageous as she took her way to the dark house where Stroud lived, deep in the woods.

SHE found him seated in a deep chair in his gloomy, book-lined library. When he rose to greet her, and would have taken her in his arms, she pushed him gently away.

"Simeon," she said, pausing just inside the door, "I am afraid I have come to hurt you. This engagement of ours has been all a dreadful mistake. I have never loved you; and Simeon, there is something about you—something bird-like—that terrifies me. I have tried to go through with it, for my father's sake, but, oh Simeon, I just couldn't face it all, when it came to the final pinch."

Stroud returned to his seat without a word, and then the girl realized, with a half-stifled gasp of horror, that a great owl had fluttered silently out of the shadows and was perched upon the high back of its master's chair. The fascination of the moment was frightful. Man's and bird's alike, the two pairs of eyes glowed luminous and golden in the half-dark. Man and bird alike seemed to brood, with heads sunk forward; and the girl saw, with a shudder, that each had sharply pointed ears; but whereas those of the great bird were feathered, those of the gross man were tip-pointed with tufts of hair.

"So," sneered Simeon, "you do not find yourself able to love me, my fair Alison?"

"Oh, please, I'm so sorry," she broke in.

The man silenced her with never a gesture, never a movement, but only by the luminous intensity of the stare he turned upon her. And, from close beside his head, the owl stared at her too.

"I was not thinking of you or me," he answered, in his soft, bird-like voice; "I was only pitying your father, who must suffer for this sudden folly of yours."

Something in the covert sneer aroused the girl's anger.

"My father will pay you back the money with which you sought to buy me," she flared back at him.

The man rose slowly to his feet and moved toward her down the length of the room, and as he came, the owl fluttered up from the back of the chair and floated forward, not a foot above his head. Bird and man together, they presented an awful picture of incarnate evil. Alison shrank back with a low moan of fear, for Simeon Stroud's hand was rising, each moment his eyes seemed to grow larger, and his lips were framing the strange call which, she felt sure, would unloose that

grim familiar, fluttering overhead to attack her eyes.

Then the unbearable tension was broken. A sharp rap echoed from the panels and the door was flung open.

"Mr. Davenant has called for Miss Mercer, sir!" announced the man-servant, and Alison ran past him into the well-lit hall where Hugh was waiting. One last frightened look she threw back into the gloomy library. Simeon Stroud still stood there, hand half raised and somber eyes smoldering in deep sockets, but of the owl that had fluttered above his head she could see no sign.

NEXT day Simeon Stroud received his £20,000 from old Tom Mercer's solicitor and from that time onward the folks of Horley saw him no more. From that time, too, Alison Mercer became a changed woman. All the carefree happiness of girlhood returned to her; she had found love and she had no fear of taking between her two hands the best of all gifts the gods may bestow upon mortals. But summer had come and gone again before Hugh returned to Horley, to ask for her hand in marriage and to receive such a joyful assent as set his whole soul singing.

They were to be married just before Christmas, and Hugh had taken an old-fashioned, furnished house at Uleswood in the lake district for their honeymoon. The place was in wild country, not far from Ullswater. There was a distinct similarity between the two names, and it never occurred to Hugh that "ule" is the old English form for "owl," and that "Uleswood" is, therefore, "Owlswood;" otherwise he might have chosen another locality for their honeymoon. But Stroud seemed to have vanished entirely from their lives, and it is doubtful if they even gave a thought to him, until Alison received, among the last of many wedding presents, four silver pepper-casters fashioned to represent owls. No card accompanied this gift, but she entertained no doubt as to whence it had come; and yet, for some reason, which she did not even attempt to explain to herself, she did not mention the matter to Hugh. Those four silver symbols filled her with a vague dread, and perhaps she feared that mention to Hugh of her former fiancé might cast some shadow upon the magic wonder of their honeymoon.

The house at Uleswood proved to be a perfect little gem of steep-gabled roofs, leaded and mullioned windows and oak-panelled rooms. The night they arrived was one of gorgeous moonlight, the bedroom was hot and close with the resinous reek of the pine logs blazing in the hearth, and Alison set the window wide open before she crept into bed.

MIDNIGHT was long past when a finger of moonlight stole softly across the floor, crept up the wall and travelled on until it rested upon two heads—one dark, the other golden—which lay so close to one another. Hugh stirred uneasily and murmured in his sleep.

"Twhitt! Twhoo!"

Hugh's sleepy eyes opened, and he turned in search of that beauty of soul and body that the night had given entirely into his keeping.

"Twhitt! Twhoo!"

Faint and from far away the horned owl's cry came echoing.

Hugh's hand stretched out and touched the soft, warm curve of his bride's breast that rose and fell so gently. The lovely warmth of living flesh comforted him, banished the vague fear which the owl's cry had aroused in his half-wakened fancy. A small hand sought for and en-

circled his fingers. His head sank back upon the pillow. Sleep was returning.

"Twhitt! Twhoo!"

Louder, and nearer now. Great evil eyes, luminous and eery, glared in through the leaded panes. Wide wings were spread and a vast form floated silently toward the open casement. Hugh Davenant turned restlessly and shuddered in his sleep. The moon was gone, swallowed up by a bank of black-bellied clouds. The white mystery circled slowly above the wedded lovers slumbering in that soft warm bed. Silence, abysmal darkness. Nothing save twin lamps of fear that floated through the gloom.

Hugh Davenant dreamed that he was back in a front-line trench in Flanders. Once more the blind night rocked to the awful roar of big guns; once more the trench-lights soared, green and ghastly, toward the storm-dark skies; and yet once more the dreaded northeast gas wind came blowing out of the blackness across No Man's Land, with death enfolded beneath the silence of its wings—its wings silent as those of an owl.

"Twhitt! Twhoo!"

The claws of the gas cloud were searching for Davenant's windpipe; its wings descended upon his face, tearing and rending his flesh. A catch at the back of his throat — fight it off! Kill those bloody swine in the helmets who were following up the foul veils of death they had let loose.

Something was striking at his eyes now. God! if they should blind him! Then, at last, his hands closed upon living flesh. Something human to battle with—something that couldn't kill, as the poison gas killed—a soft human throat—the shrill whistle of life's breath crushed out by merciless hands. Dear God, if he could only see! See and exult at the sight of starting eyeballs, glimpse the black tongue protruding through snarling lips! Curse this gas helmet that was blinding him!

He released his hands to snatch it off and felt his fingers sink into soft feathers, while something tore at his face with rending agony.

"Oh Christ! Jesu Christ, save me!"

Weak and agonized, the pitiful prayer echoed in his ears and he knew, as the mists of dream-madness cleared from his brain, that it was around her throat—his wife's throat — that his hands had been locked in the awful death-grip.

His hand stretched out toward the lamp beside the bed, but before his fingers could find the switch, something soft and feathery struck him in the face again, and again a hooked beak pecked savagely at his eyes.

"Oh! Jesu Christ, save us both from the Power of the Beast!"

Again that feeble, piteous cry for aid; and, as if in answer from overhead, a terrifying scream of baffled rage:

"Twhitt! Twhoo!"

Hugh's fumbling fingers found the switch, the room was flooded with light, and he saw a great owl, as big as an eagle it seemed, go circling round the room for the last time.

As it vanished through the window, Hugh, heedless of the blood streaming from his features, snatched up the revolver which long habit overseas had accustomed him to placing always upon a table beside his bed, and sprang to the open casement. As he reached the window the moon sailed into sight and he saw the great owl flying fast and low above the ground as it circled toward the house for a fresh attack.

The vastness of it seemed to fill all the space of night as it rushed upon him, but the man's nerves were steady as chilled steel, as he fired again and again, aiming

with deadly deliberation to send the heavy bullets smashing into the evil brain behind those luminously glowing eyes.

And then it was over. With a last wild shriek, the awful cry of some lost soul hurled down to face everlasting damnation, the great owl heeled over and fluttered slowly to the earth.

Alison crept shakily across the room, fingering her bruised throat with tender touch. She closed and barred the casement and turned to tend the man whose handsome features had been cut to ribbons by the cruel talons of the great bird.

In the morning, a gardener coming early to his work found beneath the window of the honeymooning couple the dead body of a man with strangely pointed ears and a fringe of soft hair encircling his features. The rest of his face was unidentifiable, for heavy bullets had smashed their way through between the eyes, and the head was almost blown to pieces.

But to whom, save Simeon Stroud, could those pointed, hair-tipped ears and that strange fringe of feathery fluff about the chin have belonged?

A Pair of Swords

By CARL JACOBI

A brief tale, about a strange adventure in broad daylight in the sword room of the art museum

WE HAD lingered and passed through the Egyptian Room, the Jade Room, and the chambers of the French and Italian Renaissance. Before that there had been many others, hundreds of others, it seemed, on either side of the long statue-lined halls with their floors of polished parquet. Curious how easily one forgets. Curious, rather, what the mind chooses to remember. A mummy or two, a necklace more delicate than the others, a wine cabinet which I childishly fancied and longed to have in my study, and a rare old candle chandelier, said to have illumined the table of the Spanish Philip II.

The drone of the guide's voice, low-pitched and endless, seemed to emerge from somewhere behind the Flemish hangings that covered the walls. It went on and on without the slightest inflection, and I caught myself wondering whether he talked the same when the day was over and he had left the gallery.

"One of the early works of Jean Baptiste Monnoyer, late Seventeenth Century. Formerly of the Fielding collection. Note the peculiar shadow-work in the background. . . . That will be all in this room, ladies and gentlemen. Next we have the weapon gallery, said to be the most complete in all Europe. This way, please."

I was the last of the group to pass through the intervening doorway, noting

with some relief that we had reached the final point of tour. It was five o'clock, and I must hurry if I wished to make that appointment with Luella.

An interesting chamber, this. It looked like the armor room of a mediæval castle. The art of killing a person has certainly developed. I munched another orange lozenge and moved across to where the guide was standing.

"This is the last executioner's sword used in France before the introduction of the guillotine. The blade is thirty-three inches long. All the blades on this wall are either Spanish or Spanish-owned. The carved saber on the right was presented by the Duke of Savoy to Philip III in 1603. Observe the graceful hilt. The smaller one next to it is a Persian sword, Sixteenth Century, probably brought from Tunis by Charles V."

Pistols next, from the earliest hand-cannon down, and the guide continued his litany like the hum of a lazy fly.

"A pair of holster pistols, Lazarino Cominazzo, mounts in chiselled steel. Probably the most perfect arms ever fashioned by the hand of man. An early Italian snaphance, a Kuchenreuter dueling-pistol with double leaf sight. Here we have an early Seventeenth Century arquebus, lock engraved with hunting-scene. . . ."

SOME one had tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned abruptly. For a moment I stared, chewed hard on my lozenge, then restrained a smile. Two men stood just beyond the last of the curious gallery crowd, two men dressed in a most unusual manner.

Rich blue velvet doublets, white and black satin knee-breeches, flowing lace cuffs, swords at their sides, and large hats with flowing plumes. I smiled again. Silly idea this, masquerading the gallery guards as old French musketeers.

"Pardon, *M'sieu,* but would you be kind enough to step into the next room and help two gentlemen of France settle an affair of honor?"

"Would I——?" I surveyed them coldly as refusal rose to my lips. But the words died without being spoken. For some queer reason the room with its glinting array of yatagans, colichemardes and historic blades seemed to reach far out into the background and blend with the two curiously arrayed figures before me. As I stood there, the guide's voice continuing its monotonous drone, the atmosphere slightly touched with dust pressing close at my nostrils, my first start of surprize gradually passed away, and I received the man's question as if it had not been unusual at all.

No other word was spoken. The two men, taking my silence for consent, led the way through a little doorway on the right and into a larger chamber, unfurnished save for an enormous painting of Cardinal Richelieu on the farther side.

The light from the two arched windows was better here, and I studied with interest the features of the two outlandishly dressed strangers. One, slightly the taller, was fair as a young girl, with a blond waxed mustache and blue pleasant eyes. The other, older and more at ease, was dark, smooth-shaven and thin-lipped. Both strode forward with a haughty fearless air.

"Sir," said the blond man to me, "you must be second for both of us. Should my opponent be fortunate enough to dispatch me, you will please give proper notice of my death.. I am——"

"Zounds!" cried the other. "What matter who you are? Once you are dead, you are dead, and that is the end. For rest assured I am going to teach you a lesson, and when I do there will be none to despoil my claim to the hand of Lady Constance. Sir, on guard!"

There was a ring of steel, and two swords glistened in the slanting sunlight. I stepped back and stared at the two as they parried, thrust, and sought to pierce each other's guard. Back and forth, in and out, they moved, blades gyrating with the skill of masters.

"You fight well, sir," muttered the darker man through his teeth. "'Twill be a shame to take such a blade from the king."

"Love inspires strength," breathed the other. "I fight for the most beautiful woman in the world, one whom your hands shall never touch."

The dark man curled his lip in a sneer. "Fool!" he said. "She loves me, not you. Did she not hang this locket round my neck to keep with me always, a token of her love? You are but a boy and her plaything. Behind your back she laughs at you. Look at this locket, I say. See the seal of her house upon it? You are a twice-born fool!"

Slowly the face of the blond youth paled. "She gave you that?" he cried.

"Even now she laughs at the thought of you," taunted the dark man. "Put up your sword, fellow, and I will let you live and forget."

The blue eyes were glinting like agate now, the blond hair trembling in the double shaft of sunlight.

"Then you shall wear it to your death, *M'sieu*," he said. "Do you hear? That seal shall lock your lips for ever."

It happened then in the wink of an eyelash. The blond youth feinted, dropped back, and shot his rapier straight for the throat of his opponent where the golden disk hung suspended from a silken chain. Too late the dark man strove to parry. The blade struck the locket, pierced its center and passed through the man's throat. With a gurgling cry he sank upon one knee and fell to the floor.

PERHAPS I closed my eyes for an instant after that as a wave of vertigo rushed through my head. Perhaps a cloud momentarily shut off the golden sunlight that streamed through the windows. But when once again I looked out before me, the scene had changed. I was standing back in the weapon gallery with the queer arms on all sides. The last of the curious crowd was passing through the exit, and the guide was following them a few steps behind.

"One moment," I said as he was about to step across the sill. "One moment, please. What are these two swords mounted here on this wall? Is there a history attached to them?"

The guide frowned. "Weren't you listening, sir?" he asked. "I explained that only a moment before. Those blades are the least interesting in the entire room. They are here only because they represent a type. Musketeers' swords. Once owned by guardsmen of Louis III. Why do you ask?"

Before the man could stop me, I had reached up and lifted the right-hand sword from the wall.

The guide suddenly hissed an exclamation over my shoulder, then snatched away the blade and scrutinized it closely. When he spoke there was a tone of anger in his voice.

"Damme, if some one hasn't had the nerve to take a locket from Tray Six in the Jewelry Room and stick it here on the blade!" he bemoaned. "Say, won't the superintendent be furious! Utterly ruined the thing, and for no reason at all. That locket was valuable too. Belonged to an old French noble family once. Look, sir, you can see the coat of arms just where the blade passed through."

An Elegy for Mr. Danielson

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

Mr. Danielson's corpse lay in its coffin in the front room—but what was the thing that called itself Mortimer Flaccet, and what strange power did it have over the corpse?

IT WAS not like Mr. Rufus Danielson to have died with such secrecy, nor was it like his sisters to have kept his death quiet for so long. Danielson's death occurred fully forty-eight hours before the papers got hold of the story and began to print obituary notices of the richest antiquary in London. "No one," said Miss Reba Danielson primly, "except the doctor and the undertaker and the lawyer knew of Rufus' death."

And yet Rufus Danielson had not been dead an hour when there appeared on the stoop of the Danielson home in Mayfair an elderly gentleman wearing peculiar octagonal spectacles, a long purple frock coat, a tall beaver hat, and carrying an umbrella which might have made even such a hardened antiquary as Rufus Danielson purr with delight. This personage rang the bell, and was in due time confronted by a butler who informed him that no one was at home to anybody. The visitor, however, explained that he had come a long way, and having learned only a short time before of Mr. Danielson's sudden death, desired a word or two with Miss Reba, the older of the two Danielson sisters.

He was shown with obvious reluctance into a prim parlor, where in a few moments Miss Reba Danielson faced him. He bowed. She bowed.

"May I ask——" she began.

"My name," he interrupted, "is Mortimer Flaccet, late of Idbury. I knew your brother very well—indeed, so well that I may with all modesty say that some details of his business which are unknown even to you are known to me." He smiled dryly, nodded somewhat stiffly, and caressed his umbrella jerkily with one brownish hand. "I do not wish to take up your time, Miss Danielson. I came, hearing of your brother's sudden death, to bring you an elegy which I had written especially for him; you see, I am by way of being a composer." Here he paused and smiled disquietingly, displaying a set of rather frightening teeth. "Indeed, this elegy was more or less asked for by Mr. Danielson himself—I might add that he asked me to make sure that it would be played for him upon the occasion of his death, which has now taken place—not, perhaps, in so many words did he ask for the elegy, but indirectly he demanded it."

Miss Reba Danielson was astonished, and showed it. "My dear Mr. Flaccet," she murmured, "I am sure——"

He thrust a neat roll of age-yellowed paper at her. "Here is the manuscript," he said. "I trust that Mr. Danielson's wish will be carried out." Whereupon he bowed again, clapped his hat on his head, and walked rapidly to the door, leaving Miss Reba with the manuscript held in one awkwardly outstretched hand.

At the threshold he turned. "Perhaps you remember," he said softly, "the Flaccet stones, which helped to make your

late brother so wealthy. I am the man from whom he got them."

Then he was gone.

Miss Reba looked curiously at the manuscript and turned to face her sister, Esta, who had been listening from behind a heavy portière.

"What a strange man!" exclaimed Esta. And before her sister could reply, she continued, "Is that the music—the elegy for Rufus?"

They unfurled the roll and bent over the notes on the paper. They looked at each other, looked again at the notes, and once more at each other, bewildered.

"This was certainly not written for the piano," said Miss Reba. "It looks as if it had been written for some kind of reed instrument—or instruments, perhaps."

"I suppose the tune could be picked out, though, couldn't it?" asked Esta.

"I daresay it could."

They continued to study the odd notes until Miss Reba looked up, a sudden expression of annoyance on her face. "How did that man know Rufus had died?" she asked. "I was so careful in calling the doctor and the undertaker about Rufus and making them promise to say nothing about his death to any one."

Esta shrugged. "I don't think it matters," she murmured, "even though he was most odd and insistent about our keeping his death a secret until after he'd been buried."

THE doorbell rang suddenly, and presently the undertaker came into the room. An assistant followed, and another. Miss Reba led them to the body and watched them leave the house with Rufus, hoping that the neighbors might not guess which of the three of them it was, should their inquisitive eyes penetrate the foliage about the house. Then for a few hours Mortimer Flaccet and his elegy for Rufus Danielson were forgotten.

When the undertaker had finished and returned with Rufus, and the corpse lay exposed in a coffin in the front room of the house, the elegy came to the fore again when Miss Reba began to wonder whether it ought to be played or not. She talked the matter out with Esta, and Esta thought it would do no harm to try picking out the tune at least. Accordingly, they went to the piano in the drawing-room, which adjoined the room in which the corpse lay. They propped up the awkward manuscript and prepared to play.

Miss Reba struck the first note, while Esta pressed hard upon the soft pedal, lest some one in the neighborhood hear and remember later when the news of Rufus' death came out. Both Reba and Esta struck the second note, an octave removed. They looked at each other graciously and smiled. They did the first two notes over again and ventured boldly on to the third. Within a few minutes they had struck and played the theme.

"How weird!" whispered Reba.

"Yes, isn't it?"

"Now let's do it over."

They did it over. Weird it was, certainly. It sounded like faint, far-away reed flutes playing, and for a fleeting moment it seemed to Miss Reba that there was an odd echo which did not seem to come from the piano. Esta recklessly released the soft pedal, and they played the melody again, making it sound through the quiet of the house. They felt a little guilty, and stopped playing suddenly. A faint echo lingered and whispered away. They looked at each other.

At that moment they heard a loud thump in the adjoining room.

"What was that?" whispered Reba.

"I don't know."

A soft sound broke. The sisters sat quite still, their hands catching together.

A succession of soft, sinister noises followed rapidly, and stopped abruptly when the front door announced its opening by a faint creaking.

"My friend," said a cold and vaguely familiar voice, "I have waited many years for you."

Then the door closed.

Still a few moments the sisters waited. Then Reba rose cautiously and tiptoed toward the adjoining room. She looked in, her view of the coffin obstructed by a fern. She turned to Esta, smiling.

"Everything's all right," she said.

Esta came to her side, and together they went confidently into the room. Then, with one accord, as they rounded the fern and came upon the coffin, they caught at each other, their eyes opened wide with terror, little cries choked in their throats.

For Rufus Danielson had arisen from his coffin and walked out of the house!

DURING the first half-hour after their disconcerting discovery, the sisters occupied themselves with attempts to convince themselves that something had happened to them, rather than to the corpse. But the coffin gaped empty.

Having finally convinced themselves that they, the doctor, and the undertaker had made the same regrettable error—namely, that Rufus Danielson was not after all dead, but in a state of suspended animation—they thought of telephoning the doctor. Miss Reba called.

The doctor said that Rufus Danielson had unquestionably died of an apoplectic stroke.

They called the undertaker.

The undertaker said wryly that if Rufus Danielson hadn't been dead before, he had certainly been dead when the undertaker had finished with the body.

Then, in a panic, the sisters telephoned Mr. Grimesby, the family lawyer. Even Thaddeus Grimesby's lugubrious face would be a comfort in the circumstances. Besides, he must soon be told of Rufus Danielson's death.

Mr. Grimesby came, a tall, bent old man with a long, sad face made grim by a pince-nez on an endless black cord. He carried a brief-case bearing the marks of long usage, and containing at the moment a ponderous sheaf of papers neatly inscribed "Danielson." The sisters flew at him, each eager to relate what had happened. They told it together, though Reba, being older, had the most to say.

For a few moments after they had finished, Mr. Grimesby was somewhat put out. However, because he began immediately to rationalize what he had heard, he soon convinced himself that something had occurred to disturb the sisters to the point of insanity. He was, therefore, tactful enough to say nothing, and just sufficiently tactless to ignore the odd features of the occurrence.

"Let us consider this matter logically," he said. "You mentioned Flaccet's stones. These stones, I happen to know, are still in your brother's possession, and I think he intends to keep them to the end of his days. They're immensely valuable, you know."

Miss Reba interrupted. "Rufus has reached the end of his days, Mr. Grimesby," she said in some irritation. "He died this noon. The doctor certified his death and the undertaker made it sure. Somehow, however, his corpse has vanished."

Mr. Grimesby was nonplussed. He glanced severely at Reba, and presently he continued. "The Flaccet stones were obtained by trickery from this man Mortimer Flaccet, a very old and rather queer gentleman living in Idbury. This happened when your brother was but twenty.

(Please turn to page 266)

THE cover designs by M. Brundage seem to have caught the fancy of our readers. Enthusiastic letters from all parts of the United States have been received praising this artist's covers since we first began to use them a year ago; but even so, we were unprepared for the flood of approval that greeted the cover of the June issue, illustrating Robert E. Howard's fascinating story, *Black Colossus*. This artist's color work is done with pastel crayons, and the originals are so delicate that we are afraid even to sneeze when we have a cover design in our possession, for fear the picture will disappear in a cloud of dust; and we are always glad when it is safely in the hands of the engravers. Perishable as the originals are, they lend themselves well to reproduction by the engravers and printers; and you, the readers, have shown that you like them.

"May I extend congratulations upon the June cover design?" writes N. J. O'Neail, of Toronto, Canada. "It is the most artistic, I consider, in years. The black background is not only striking to the eye, but challenging to the mind, whispering of unnamable forces of darkness and evil, the atmosphere of which Howard so admirably evokes. And may I also voice sincere, if belated, regret at the death of Rev. Henry S. Whitehead, a Christian gentleman and scholar? His purity and clarity of style rivalled those of E. F. Benson; and his power of suggesting intangible horror was only second to that of Lovecraft. I've noticed two or three recent requests in the Eyrie for publication of Abdul Alhazred's *Necronomicon,* and would add my vote to the plea, if there actually is such a volume; though I've always been inclined to regard it as a creation of H. P. Lovecraft's masterful brain."

W. B. Talman writes from Spring Valley, New York: "I too want to compliment you on the increasingly good appearance of WT. When every other magazine is taking on a cheaper appearance, it is refreshing to see one that looks continually better. The cover on the last was a knockout. Why not continue to make judicious use of black?—it seems to fit the general theme. *Dead Man's Belt* in a recent issue was one of the most remarkable stories I've read for a long time—not so remarkable from a weird standpoint, but from other points of view."

Richard H. Hart writes from Corpus Christi, Texas: "I wish to compliment you on the June WT. From the well-done cover to the well-chosen reprint it is almost perfect (the slight imperfection being the style of *The Dwellers in the House,* which wasn't adequate to the excellent theme and plot). Hugh Cave's *The Crawling Curse* was almost a perfect example of its type; it should rank high in the next O. Henry selection."

"The last WEIRD TALES was marvelous," writes Mrs. E. W. Murphy from Cherrydale, Virginia. "I vote for *Black Colossus* by Howard. I don't believe I ever anywhere read anything of any sort that you could call definitely better than that. He has caught the atmosphere of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."

"As one who has read and enjoyed your splendid magazine for many years," writes Frank Bristol, of El Monte, California, "I wish to join others in lodging a protest against the increasing number of science-fiction stories that is appearing in WEIRD TALES. The weird tale and the scientific fiction story are two distinct types of writing, and you can not combine both and continue to uphold the fine standards in imaginative literature that you have set. *Revelations in Black* by Carl Jacobi I believe is the outstanding story of the year. I can not explain the tremendous impression this excellent tale made on me. Mr. Jacobi's artistry is not to be denied."

"I have been reading WEIRD TALES for about a year," writes Bill Bailey, of Pittsburgh, "but have done so rather irregularly until the December issue. Since that number I have eagerly sought the news stands for my copy of WEIRD TALES. The reason for this lies in the marked improvement of the publication. I wish to congratulate you for this superb winning streak, and for your high batting average. It appears that the Eyrie has become a battle-ground for the proponents and opponents of weird-scientific stories. I certainly favor this type of story, and I believe that you should publish more interplanetary and other scientific tales, rather than fewer of that type of fiction. Kline, Ernst and Hamilton are masters of science-weird-fiction. My only criticism is that I believe WEIRD TALES should print the complete letters in the Eyrie. I now terminate my letter wishing the best of ghosts and vampires to grace the pages of WEIRD TALES."

A letter from Mrs. C. F. Edwards, of White Plains, New York, says: "One day, some nine years or so ago, I got tired of listening to Alabama cast twenty-four votes for Underwood and went out to get a magazine of some kind. My eye was caught by a magazine with a cover portraying a ghost on horseback—and here I am, not having missed a copy since! Let me hand a great big orchid or something of the sort to Robert E. Howard and Seabury Quinn. I'm grabbing the MAGIC CARPET Magazine now on the latter's account, but even his new hero will never replace de Grandin in my affections. And let me get into the interplanetary scrap. If people like 'em (and I suppose some do), restrain yourself to one, say every other issue. Why not collect ten of your best stories and publish them in book form? Let your readers pick the ones. Publish a list in the Eyrie of thirty or forty that have aroused the most interest in your long and varied career, and let your readers do the voting. I can bet that *The Rats in the Walls, The Cats of Ulthar* and *The Brass Bowl,* and perhaps also *The Chain,* would lead. And a word for your covers. I am so glad to see the beautiful one on the June issue. Never mind if some people object to a lovely lady in undress. For my part, I simply couldn't get a thrill out of a silk-hatted or bustled ghost. What's become of the illustrator that signed his pictures H. R.? He was by far the best you have ever had. Hard, harsh outlines and mystery simply don't go together."

T. R. Gratton, of Burlington, Vermont, writes to the Eyrie: "After reading the June issue of WEIRD TALES I felt so good that I decided to write and compliment you on your efforts. My favorite authors are Ed. Hamilton, R. E. Howard,

Otis Adelbert Kline and Jack Williamson. *Black Colossus* in the June issue seems to me to be one of the best stories Howard has written about Conan. Please have him keep up the good work."

Writes Henry Kuttner, of Hollywood, California: "My introduction to WEIRD TALES came almost ten years ago with Lovecraft's *The White Ape*. Since then I have found your magazine to be my stand-by and my favorite. It is the only one I buy every month. As I have followed your fortunes through good times and bad, I feel qualified to express my opinion upon several controversial issues. Regarding reprints: I think that most people have missed the real point. By all means have reprints, both from old issues of WEIRD TALES and from other sources, but *keep them up to today's standards*. You know, and I know, and any person of reasonable intelligence knows, that if *The Wolf-leader* and *Frankenstein* had been written today and submitted to you, they would not have been accepted. The classics of yesterday are not necessarily popular today. Avoid hide-bound opinion which has been handed down from generation to generation. The two serials I mention were poor indeed. Regarding the discussed question of nudity in the illustrations: by all means use the human form when it furthers the atmosphere of weirdness. But when it is used merely to attract the casual pornographic, it is unpleasant to the *bona fide* WEIRD TALES readers. A word of commendation for your synopses of the preceding chapters of serials. Few magazines bother much about that necessary bit of retrospect, but your 'The Story Thus Far' shows painstaking care and is often as enjoyable as the story itself. I have before me a May issue, and want to mention August W. Derleth favorably. He has never written a masterpiece, but one can always depend upon him for a good story."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? The most popular story in the June WEIRD TALES, as shown by your votes and letters, was Robert E. Howard's unusual tale, *Black Colossus*.

My favorite stories in the August WEIRD TALES are:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)---------- Why?----------

(2)---------- ----------

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in Weird Tales if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:

Coming Next Month

WHEN Conan wheeled to see the tapestry settling back in place and to hear Natala's muffled cry, he hurled himself against the wall with a maddened roar. Rebounding from the impact that would have splintered the bones of a lesser man, he ripped away the tapestry, revealing what appeared to be a blank wall. Beside himself with fury he lifted his saber as though to hew through the marble, when a sudden sound brought him about, eyes blazing.

A score of figures faced him, yellow men in purple tunics, with short swords in their hands. As he turned they surged in on him with hostile cries. He made no attempt to conciliate them. Maddened at the disappearance of his sweetheart, the barbarian reverted to type.

A snarl of bloodthirsty gratification hummed in his bull-throat as he leaped, and the first attacker, his short sword overreached by the whistling saber, went down with his brains gushing from his split skull. Wheeling like a cat, Conan caught a descending wrist on his edge, and the hand gripping the sword flew into the air, scattering a shower of red drops. But Conan had not paused or hesitated. A pantherish twist and shift of his body avoided the blundering rush of two yellow swordsmen, and the blade of one, missing its objective, was sheathed in the breast of the other. A yell of dismay went up at this mischance, and Conan allowed himself a short bark of laughter as he bounded aside from a whistling cut and slashed under the guard of yet another man of Xuthal. A long spurt of crimson followed his singing edge and the man crumpled screaming, his belly-muscles cut through.

The warriors of Xuthal howled like mad wolves. Unaccustomed to battle, they were ridiculously slow and clumsy compared to the tigerish barbarian whose motions were blurs of quickness possible only to steel thews knit to a perfect fighting brain. They floundered and stumbled, hindered by their own numbers; they struck too quickly or too soon, and cut only empty air. Conan was never motionless or in the same place an instant; springing, side-stepping, whirling, twisting, he offered a constantly shifting target for their swords, while his own curved blade sang death about their ears.

But whatever their faults, the men of Xuthal did not lack courage. They swarmed about him yelling and hacking, and through the arched doorways rushed others, awakened from their slumbers by the unwonted clamor. . . .

You can not afford to miss this eery thrill-tale of the weird city of Xuthal, and the monstrosity that slithered through the streets and corridors of the city in search of its human prey. This mighty tale will be published complete in the September WEIRD TALES:

THE SLITHERING SHADOW

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

—ALSO—

MALAY HORROR

By SEABURY QUINN

A tale of stark terror, and the grisly thing that pursued a beautiful girl to America—a story of Jules de Grandin.

THE RETURN OF ANDREW BENTLEY

By AUGUST W. DERLETH AND MARK SCHORER

Amos Wilder was dead and his body laid away in the vault, but what was that weird shape with flapping cape that strove to drag the corpse away?

THE WATCHER IN THE GREEN ROOM

By HUGH B. CAVE

A gripping story of the weird doom that befell a man who had murdered his wife.

THE HORROR ON THE ASTEROID

By EDMOND HAMILTON

An amazing story of interplanetary space, and the weird fate that befell the passengers and crew of a space-ship that was wrecked by meteors.

Sept. WEIRD TALES Out Sept. 1

(Continued from page 261)

They are, as I said, of immense value, and are thought to have been Druidic jewels. Your brother practically built his fortune on them."

Mr. Grimesby had been taking in the room while he was talking, and his eyes came to rest presently upon the manuscript of Mortimer Flaccet's elegy for Rufus Danielson. He continued to look at the music unseeingly for some moments as he talked; then abruptly he came to his feet, strode over to the piano, and picked up the manuscript.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded in a hoarse, excited voice.

"Mr. Flaccet brought it," said Esta.

Mr. Grimesby looked from the sisters to the manuscript in his hand and back again. "Do you know what it is?" he asked breathlessly.

"An elegy for Rufus," said Reba.

"It's a chant, a magic chant for raising the dead," said Mr. Grimesby, "an ancient chant supposedly used in Druidic rites. What a find! what a find! This is valuable, very valuable. Haven't you noticed how old the manuscript is? And for what instruments it was written—panpipes?"

The sisters shook their heads.

"Very old. And a Mr. Flaccet brought it, you say?" Mr. Grimesby cocked his head oddly to one side and closed his eyes. "Very odd," he said presently. "I'm sure the original Mortimer Flaccet died without heirs, indeed I am; but apparently some distant relative of the same name has since come forward. Was he a young man, or an old man?"

"Mr. Flaccet was an old man, dressed in a purple frock coat and beaver hat, wearing octagonal spectacles, and carrying an ancient umbrella," said Reba.

For the first time that afternoon Mr. Grimesby was palpably upset. "My dear Miss Danielson," he said in a shaky voice, "the man you describe has been dead over fifty years." He cleared his throat and added, "Something must indeed have disturbed you greatly today."

FORTUNATELY for the sisters, who were rapidly losing patience with Mr. Grimesby, both the doctor and the undertaker arrived at that moment to inquire into the state of Rufus Danielson's corpse, and Mr. Grimesby, having the sisters' improbable tale thus confirmed, was seriously distressed.

But he recovered himself shortly, for it was he who, in a reluctant voice, pointed out that Rufus Danielson's corpse had vanished while the sisters were playing an elegy which was in reality an ancient and magical chant for the raising of the dead. "And that music," he added in a halting voice, "was brought here by a dead man who always threatened to return for his stones—which Rufus, I regret to say, frankly stole from him."

Mr. Grimesby turned to take up the music from the piano bench where he had placed it. But his hand paused in midair. For where the music had lain, there now lay a thin mocking film of dust, an outline of the manuscript, nothing more.

Suddenly the telephone rang. Mr. Grimesby forced himself away from the piano bench in some agitation and went to answer it.

He returned to the silent room some minutes later and said, "Your brother's bank calling, asking what ailed Rufus. Apparently he was just down at the bank, opened his safety deposit box, took out the Flaccet stones and gave them to his companion—who gave the name of Mortimer Flaccet."

"Down at the bank!" exclaimed the doctor. "But he was dead—I know!"

Even as Mr. Grimesby was about to answer, there came the creaking sound of the front door opening. Reba half rose to go to the door, then sat down again. There was a noise as of feet shuffling across the floor—then a horrific grunting sound—and a terror-fraught silence.

Reba rose and went to the door of the adjoining room, her hand at her throat. With one accord the others followed at her heels. They went into the room, rounded the fern, and came upon the coffin.

The corpse of Rufus Danielson lay there, ungainly, sprawling—its feet still wet with fresh snow—and a terrible line of glistening footprints led across the rug from the outer door!

The Green Sea

By HUNG LONG TOM

The Green Sea
Is a great glowing emerald
That lies beyond the Kansu border
Where the wind is warm
With scents of countless flowers.
It is the child
Of the Yellow Sun
And Blue Night Sky.
Sometimes when winter
Comes across the Jade Pass,
Bits of snow
Like pearls
Fall into
The glowing sea,
Mute tributes
From the Fairies
Of the Frost.

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AT THE CROSS-ROADS OF AMERICA

INDIANAPOLIS

The Door*

By HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

THOSE in the motor-car hardly felt the slight, though sickening, impact. It was rather, indeed, because of the instinct for something gone wrong, than because of conviction that he had struck anything more important than a roll of tangled burlap from some passing moving-van, that the driver brought his heavy car to a stop with a grinding of brakes strenuously applied, and went back to see what he had struck.

He had turned the corner almost incidentally; but when he alighted and went back, when the thin gleam of his flashlight revealed to him the heap of huddled pulp which lay there, the driver realized in the throes of a hideous nausea what it was his heavy machine had spurned and crushed. . . .

ROGER PHILLIPS, intent upon the first really decent act of his whole life, hardly noticed what was forward. He had been crossing the street. He continued to be intent on his own concerns. Interrupted only by a kind of cold shudder to which he gave only passing thought as if with the very outer edge of his mind, he did not stop, but crossed the sidewalk, looking up as he had done many times before to reassure himself that the lights were out in the living-room of the apartment up there on the third floor of the apartment house.

They were out, as he had confidently anticipated, and, reassured, he quickly mounted the steps to the front entrance. Some one came out, hurriedly, and passed him as he entered, the rush taking him by surprize. He turned his head as quickly as he could, to avoid recognition. It was old Mr. Osler, his father's neighbor, who had rushed out. The elderly man was in his shirt sleeves, and appeared greatly agitated, so much so that young Phillips was certain he had not been recognized, had hardly even been noticed. He breathed an audible sigh of relief. He did not want old Osler to mention this chance meeting to his father the next time he should see him, and he knew Osler to be garrulous.

The young man mounted lightly and hurriedly the two flights of steps that led to the door of his father's apartment. He thrust his key into the patent lock of the apartment door confidently, almost with-

*From WEIRD TALES for November, 1924.

out thought—a mechanical motion. As mechanically, he turned the key to the right. It was an old key, and it fitted the keyhole easily. He knew that his father and mother were at the symphony concert. They had not missed one for years during the season for symphony concerts, and this was their regular night. He had chosen this night for that reason. He knew the colored maid was out, too. He had seen her, not five minutes earlier, getting on a car for Boston. "The coast," as he phrased the thought to himself, somewhat melodramatically, "was clear!" He was certain of security from interruption. Only let him get safely into the apartment, do what he had to do, and as quietly and unobtrusively depart, and he would be satisfied, quite satisfied.

But the lock offered unexpected resistance. It was inexplicable, irritating. His overtensed nerves revolted abruptly at this check. The key had slipped into the slot, as always, without difficulty—but it would not turn! Furiously he twisted it this way and that. At last he removed it and stared at it curiously. There was nothing amiss with the key. Could his father have had the lock changed?

Anger and quick shame smote him, suddenly. He looked closely at the lock. No, it was unchanged. There were the numberless tiny scratch-marks of innumerable insertions. It was the same.

Gingerly, carefully, he inserted the key again. He turned it to the right. Of course it turned to the right; he remembered that clearly. He had so turned it countless times.

It would not move. He put out all his puny strength, and still it would not turn. Hot exasperation shook him.

As he swore under his breath in his irritation at this bar to the fulfilment of his purpose, he became for the first time conscious of a rising commotion in the

street below, and he paused, irresolutely, and listened, his nerves suddenly strung taut. Many voices seemed to be mingled in the excited hum that came to his ears. Bits of phrases, even, could be distinguished. Something had happened down there, it seemed. As he listened, the commotion of spoken sound resolved itself into a tone which, upon his subconscious effort to analyze it, seemed to express horror and commiseration, with an overtone of fear. The fear communicated itself to him. He shook, as the voice of the growing throng came up to him in sickening waves of apprehension.

What if this should mean an interruption? Impatiently wrenching himself away from his preoccupation and back to his more immediate concern with the door, he thrust the key into the lock a third time, this time aggressively, violently. Again he tried to snap the lock. Again it resisted him, unaccountably, devilishly, as it seemed to him.

Then, in his pause of desperation, he thought he heard his own name spoken. He could feel his face go white, the roots of his hair prickle. He listened, intently, crouching cat-like on the empty landing before the door of his father's apartment, and as he listened, every nerve intent, he heard the entrance-door below flung open, and the corporate voice of the throng outside, hitherto muffled and faint, came to him suddenly in a wave of sound, jumbled and obscure as a whole, but with certain strident voices strangely clear and distinct.

A shuffle of heavy feet came to his ears, as if several persons were entering the lower hallway, their footsteps falling heavily on the tiled flooring. They would be coming upstairs!

He shrank back against the door—that devilish door! If only he could get it open!

Something like this, he told himself, in a wave of self-pity that swept him—something like this, unexpected, unforeseen, unreasonable—something like this was always happening to him!

That door! It was an epitome of his futile, worthless life. That had happened to him, just the same kind of thing, a month ago when he had been turned out of his home. The events of the intervening weeks rushed, galloping, through his overtensed mind. And now, as ever since that debacle, there was present with him a kind of unforgettable vision of his mother—his poor mother, her face covered with the tears which she made no effort to wipe away—his poor mother, looking at him, stricken, through those tears which blurred her face; and there was his father, the kindly face set now in a stern mask, pale and with deep lines—his father telling him that this was the end. There would be no public prosecution. Was he not their son? But he must go! His home would be no longer his home.

He recalled the dazed days that followed; the mechanical activities of his daily employment; his search, half-hearted, for a furnished room. He recalled, shuddering, the several times when, moved by the mechanism of long-established usage, he had nearly taken an Allston car for "home", which was to be no longer his home. . . .

He had not sent back the key. He could not tell why he had kept it. He had forgotten to hand it back to his father when he had left, and his father, doubtless unthinkingly, had not suggested its return. That was why he still had it, and here he stood, now, on the very threshold of that place which had been "home" to him for so many years, about to make the restitution that would do something to remove the saddest of all the blots on his conscience—and he could not get in!

THE men, talking with hushed voices, had reached the first landing. Young Phillips, caught by a sudden gust of abject terror, shrank against the stubborn door, the door which unaccountably he could not open. Then, his mind readjusting itself, he remembered that he had no reason for concealment, for fear. Even though he might be seen here, even though these people should be coming all the way up the stairs, it could not matter. Let him be seen; what of it? He was supposed to live here, of course. It was only a short time since he had actually ceased to live here, and his father had said nothing. No public charge had been made against him. How one's conscience could make one a coward!

Under the invigorating stress of this reaction, he straightened himself, stood up boldly. Realizing that it might appear odd for him to be discovered standing here aimlessly on the landing, he started to go downstairs. But by now the narrow staircase was completely blocked by the ascending group. He stopped, half-way from that flight. The men were carrying something, something heavy, and of considerable bulk, it would seem. He could not see clearly in that dim light just what it was. He stopped, half-way down, but none of the men carrying the awkward bundle, covered with what looked like an automobile curtain, looked up, or appeared to notice him. Neither did the straggling group of men, and a woman or two, who were following them.

Fascinated, he gazed at what they were carrying. As they approached and took the turn in the stairs, so that the electric light on the upper landing shone more directly upon it, he looked closer. It was the body of a man! It hung, limp and ungainly, in their somewhat awkward grasp as they shouldered up toward him.

Something about it seemed vaguely

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By SEABURY QUINN

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familiar, the details presenting themselves to his fascinated gaze in rapid succession: the trouser-ends, the shoes. . . .

THE men turned the last corner in the winding stairway and came into full view. As they turned the corner, the leather curtain slipped and the face of the dead man was for a moment exposed to view. Roger Phillips looked at it, fascinated, horrified. Then one of the men, halting for an instant, drew the corner of the curtain over the face again, and he could no longer see it. The head rolled. The broken body had been grievously crushed.

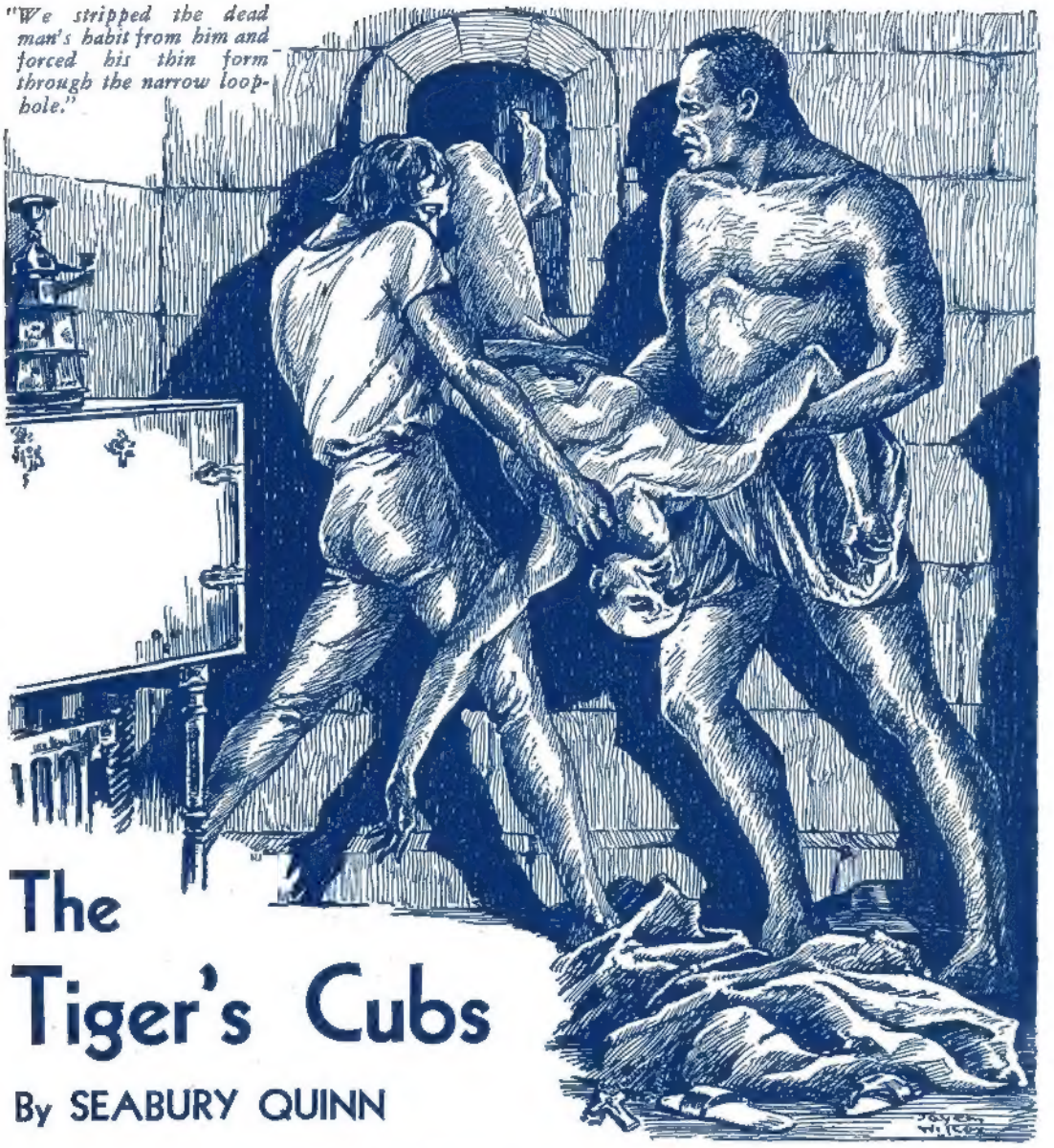
Roger Phillips, utterly distraught, cowered, a limp heap, against the unyielding door of his father's apartment. He had looked for one horrific instant into his own distorted, dead face!

The men, breathing hard, reached the landing. One of them, gingerly shifting his portion of the burden upon the shoulder of another, stepped forward to ring the bell of the Phillips apartment. No one answered the ring, and the man rang again, impatiently, insistently. The bell trilled inside the empty apartment. The men stood, silently, shifting uneasily from one foot to another. Behind them, a thin mutter came from the waiting stragglers who had followed them, moved by an inordinate curiosity.

"Here's a key sticking in the door," said the man who had rung the bell. "Guess we'd be all right if we opened the door and took the young fellow in. There doesn't seem to be any one home."

A murmur of assent came from the other men.

He turned the key to the left, then to the right, and the door opened. They carried the broken body inside and carefully laid it out on the sofa in the living-room.



"We stripped the dead man's habit from him and forced his thin form through the narrow loop-hole."

The Tiger's Cubs

By SEABURY QUINN

DARK lowered the night and full ghastlily keened the wind among the branches as Hassan and I pricked our way towards the gloomy abode of Don Miguel de Cortez y Palma, Governor of the district and representative of his Most Catholic Majesty of Spain in seaward Portugal.

"By the tail of Allah's mare, Master, I think we ride through the country of the afrits," Hassan declared, gazing over his shoulder with more fear in his glance than I had ever seen him show before.

"Be silent, O monstrous uncouthness!" I ordered him. "O offspring of a nearly noseless mother; wot ye not that afrits and djinn live only in the terror-tales of women to fright their little ones from naughtiness?"

"Not so," he answered sullenly. "It is most certain they exist. Are not the old books filled with stories of 'that people'? Do not they dwell in tombs and gloomy forests such as this, and seek to lure the wayfarer to his doom by wailing like a woman in distress, what time they build their fires to roast their victims' flesh? Yea, by the horns of Allah's goat, it is true. Have not I heard——"

"*Wallah,* ye have heard much, but what do ye know?" I asked, for his chatter of djinn and devils was working on my nerves till I was ready to see a monstrous form in every changing shadow cast by the wind-blown trees. "If ye can give me proof of what ye say, say on; if not, then in God's name hold thy peace, for——"

"*Ya Allah!* In His glorious name I take refuge from the darts of Satan!" the black one screamed. "Behold, my lord, the proof for which thou asked!"

And as if to lend full color to his fancy, the sudden wailing of a woman in extremity rang through the wood, and through the black-boled trees there flashed the flickering reflection of a newly lighted fire. . . .

The startling adventure into which Carlos the Tiger and Black Hassan were suddenly plunged is told in fascinating style in the current issue of the MAGIC CARPET Magazine.—Adv.

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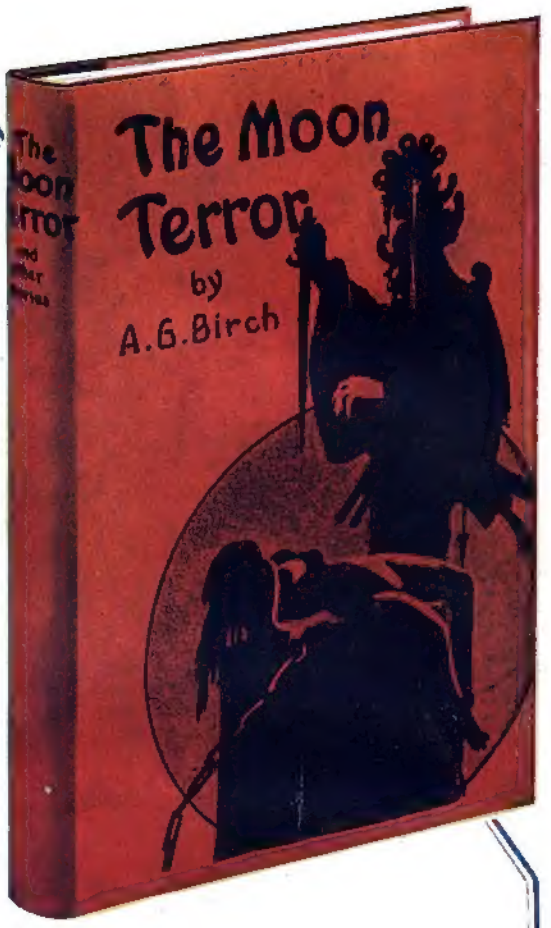

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